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Malachi 3:13 – 4:2a, 5 – 6
2 Thessalonians 3: 6 – 13

Psalms 98
Luke 21: 5 – 19

Mark Twain once wrote, “Most people are bothered by the passages of Scripture they don’t understand. But for me, I have always noticed that the passages that bother me are those I do understand.” Perhaps today’s lessons make us feel somewhat like Mark Twain, somewhat uncomfortable and somewhat bothered. Evil-doers burned to a stubble. Colossal stone buildings toppled. Wars, insurrections, earthquakes, famine, plagues, and dreadful portents and great signs from heaven! Arrest, persecution, betrayal, hatred. Perhaps we *should* feel uncomfortable. After all, we are talking about the Second Coming, the Day of Judgment.

Today’s lessons speak to something we don’t address much either in the Episcopal Church or in our culture at large: the end times. Or at least until we get to the end of the church year and we begin to look towards Advent and the coming of our Lord. Sure, we see it on a sign as the topic of a sermon or Bible study at some of the very conservative churches, and it was the premise of the Left Behind series of books 15 – 20 years ago, but otherwise, the world keeps turning without giving much thought to it. Perhaps for some of us, it is a little scary to consider that we might actually be living in the end times, the day when time as we know it will end. Jesus certainly seems to be describing *this* time in which *we* live. Some of us may even feel like it’s imminent after this year’s horrific election campaigns. And yet, there has probably been no time in history that has been without war and earthquakes, famine and plague, betrayal and hatred.

People who live in a world which they perceive as painful, unjust and evil, yet humanly irredeemable, understandably look to a time when some divine force will intervene to right the wrongs and end the suffering and chaos. So even centuries before Jesus and the first Christians, many Jews had begun looking for a divine, cataclysmic re-ordering of the created world. Hence, Malachi’s prophecy of the Great Day of the Lord, when the faithful will be rewarded and the evil shall be burned to stubble. A prophecy which dates to around 500 – 450 BCE.

Malachi’s prophecy reflects the Jewish hope – and more than a hope, a long-standing expectation – that God will once again come and deliver the people of God from oppression and evil. In that time of redemption, the omnipotent power of God will be revealed once and for all, for all nations to see and honor. God’s salvation of the people of God will usher in a Golden Age for Israel. However, a period of great upheaval, anguish and judgment will necessarily precede this redemption, as the corruption of this world is turned on its head and conquered. No one is exempt from this difficult time, but God will send a deliverer to lead the faithful through the suffering.

These kinds of beliefs are recorded in what are known as “apocalyptic” writings. Writings such as the book of Daniel in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Revelation to John in the Christian Scriptures, and, as we heard, in today’s passages. “Apocalypse” means a revelation, an unveiling of things which have been hidden, a disclosure. And what is revealed in the events chronicled in such writings is God’s power and glory, God’s justice and mercy, God’s divine ability to directly intervene in the world. But most of all, it is God’s steadfast love for the people of God which is disclosed.

Many of these apocalyptic texts were written and circulated in the last few centuries before the birth of Jesus, and in the first century following. So it is in the well-established swirl of

apocalyptic fervor that Jesus, as well as the disciples, enter the picture. This hope of deliverance for the faithful is obviously an expectation which, according to Luke, Jesus shares and teaches about. In fact, Jesus himself redefines the end-times as a process inaugurated with the birth of the Christ. Whether or not Jesus expects his own sacrifice to hasten such events, Jesus believes God's intervention will occur during the lifetime of some of his disciples.

Jesus has been sitting in the Temple, teaching those with ears to hear and eyes to see, and responding to those who challenge his authority and insight. People come and go in the precincts of the Temple while Jesus speaks. They pray, offer sacrifices, pause to listen in on or take part in scholarly debates and teachings, and then go about their daily business. For the people of Jesus' time and place, the Temple is the heartbeat of life and it bustles with activity. Perhaps in our culture, Jesus' vantage point would be akin to sitting in a Starbucks, or Russell Union Building on campus, or a post-office or urban rail station.

At a lull in the dialogue between rabbi and disciples perhaps, a person in the crowd gathered around Jesus comments on the immensity, beauty and grandeur of the temple. And who would not? Constructed of mammoth slabs of stone and adorned with precious jewels and gold, the Temple is a sight to behold. Part National Cathedral, part Supreme Court, part World Trade Center, the Temple is a colossal architectural monument – and some would say sacrament – to God. The Temple symbolizes as much as makes real the presence of God. The Temple is an outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace which God confers on the righteous. The Temple is strong. The Temple is dependable. The Temple is secure.

So it is not without an edge in their voices that people respond to Jesus' dire prediction of the destruction of the Temple. Jesus, what do you mean that this Temple, too, like Solomon's, will be destroyed?? Say it isn't so! What would we do without the heart and soul, the centerpiece, the cornerstone, of our world? If this Temple, the center not only of religious life, but of civic and social life as well, crumbles, then what will become of us? If none of this can last, then what *is* permanent? When is this going to happen and how will we know that it is coming so that we can prepare for it?

In short, Jesus' answer is both warning and reassurance. But notice, that despite all the horrible events which Jesus mentions, Jesus' manner is one of calm trust. Jesus possesses and proclaims with deep certainty, and a peace that passes all understanding, that the love of God prevails through all. Surprising for almost anyone, but especially for someone who will be captured, tortured, tried and crucified before the week is out.

Jesus' response to the question of when the Kingdom of God will be ushered in is that the end is not yet, but it *will* come, and at a time that no one can predict. But *when* that time comes, the faithful need only trust in God to provide them with whatever they will need to see them through. Biblical scholar and theologian, Fred Craddock, writes that Jesus makes no bones about the disciples suffering; they will not be exempt. Craddock says, "There is nothing here of an arrogance born of a doctrine of rapture [a very modern concept] in which believers are removed from the scenes of persecution and suffering." As Craddock points out, Jesus' words clearly indicate otherwise. In other words, no *Left Behind*. Instead, it will be a time to witness to the love of God, not a time to either shrink back or to escape miraculously. And it will be by being faithful, though the faithful may lose their lives in this world, that eternal life will be gained.

For two thousand years, Christians have lived in the in-between time – anticipating the imminent end of this present world and the inauguration of the Kingdom of Heaven. For two thousand years, Christians have struggled to understand and to re-interpret Jesus' words, even as time and time again, the predictions of events have come to pass. For two thousand years, Christians have lived in the tension between faith and culture. We keep proclaiming Christ's coming again. We keep praying, "Come, Lord Jesus." In two weeks, on the First Sunday of Advent, we will once again begin to prepare ritually for this to happen. Do we really believe it, and do we really mean it? Do we really want all that Jesus promises by his coming again?

At some fundamental level, we all want security, certainty and perfection. We want to be able to synchronize our watches with the daily rising and setting of the sun; we want to know that our lives have meaning and purpose; we want to live in a world that is comfortable and warm and loving. It is one thing to *want* security, certainty and perfection in life, however it is another thing to *demand* it or *expect* it, or to think we can either control or provide them. That is an illusion. And yet much of our lives are occupied with doing just that. We seek temples of security in our relationships, or status, or military might, or wealth. We seek temples of certainty through technological and intellectual pursuits and by following every health and diet fad. We seek temples of perfection by trying to have the perfect family, setting the stage for the perfect holidays, or pursuing the perfect job. And Jesus says all that can and will crumble. All that we can truly count on is God.

So how are we to live in this in-between time? Are all those things – relationships, working hard, a healthy lifestyle, education and enjoyment – worthless? Hardly. Jesus is telling us to keep our eyes on the prize, though. That our trust in God's love is what matters most. Out of that trust flows our relationships with God, our neighbors and ourselves. We are to live lives of patient endurance, lives circumscribed by hope and faith and love. We are to live lives of good stewardship over all with which we are entrusted. We are to live lives respecting the dignity of, and seeking justice and peace for, every human being. We are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and liberate the oppressed. We are to rejoice in God and in the lost being found. We are to laugh and cry and love. We are to be childlike in our wonder and awe of God and God's creation. Whether or not we live to see the Second Coming is not important. Because if we, like faithful Christians of the last two thousand years, live out our lives in expectation of and preparation for Christ's coming again, then our lives will be immeasurably enriched and blessed by that experience.

"Let the rivers clap their hands" writes the Psalmist, "and let the hills ring out with joy before the Lord, when the Lord comes to judge the earth. In righteousness shall the Lord judge the world and the peoples with equity."

Come, Lord Jesus. May we pray and live like we mean it.

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