

Stewardship and the End of the World

Stewardship Sunday

26th Sunday After Pentecost

November 13, 2016

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Texts: Isaiah 65.17-25;
 Isaiah 12;
 2 Thessalonians 3.6-13;
 Luke 21.5-19

Did you appreciate the dramatic sermon title for today: *Stewardship and the End of the World*? When Pastor Gordon saw what I had turned in he sent me a text saying “Nice sermon title!” I wrote back saying “It’s what the texts called for.” I mean that in all seriousness. Every single one of these texts is written to speak to God’s people about a time when the world as they knew it was coming to an end.

Isaiah 12 was given to the northern kingdom of Israel 740 years or so before the common era. This incredible song was meant to strengthen the trust of a terrified people as they witnessed the crumbling of their nation. In that context, as the Assyrians are about to destroy them, the prophet sings “Surely it is God who saves me; I will trust and not be afraid.”¹ I imagine some of the northern tribes in the height of their despair singing these words with trembling lips. Almost like a mantra meant to quiet a nervous system in full-on fight or flight mode. (Deep breath) “For the Lord God is my stronghold and my sure defense, and God will be my Savior.” Keep in mind the northern tribes would never be a sovereign nation again. Their world was ending. And yet they sang this song.

Isaiah 65 pulls us 53 chapters and 200 years forward in time. This passage comes from what we call third Isaiah and speaks now to the southern tribes, the kingdom of Judah. After they were conquered by the Babylonians, some of their people taken into exile for over 50 years. This word comes after the exiles return and have to re-integrate into society

¹ Line from the hymn “Surely It is God Who Saves Me.” Text from the Draft Proposed Book of Common Prayer, 1976 and music by Jack Noble White, 1976, Based on the text of Isaiah 12.

with those who never left. After the initial joy of release, the re-entry was fraught with conflict between those who remained and those who returned. How could they possibly heal from the trauma of these turbulent years?

The word of God through the prophet is “Be glad and rejoice...for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.”² I can imagine these people with all the anger and tension between them just shaking their heads “What joy? This place is a mess. People are at each other’s throats. Are you crazy?” The prophet clarifies speaking in the voice of God “I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people.”³ The joy begins in the heart of God as God delights in us. This is not happiness born of circumstance because everything is lining up as we would want them to be. No – it is that deep joy born of a holy vision that sees deeper and wider than the suffering of this present moment.

When I say deeper, I mean God’s capacity to see beneath the thoughts, the behaviors, the decisions of any given moment; to see us as image bearers of God who may in any given moment be 100% wrong, off track, and out of our minds but are still nonetheless loved by God and still redeemable. That’s what I mean by deeper. When I say wider, I mean God’s capacity to see what is yet to come, what is still possible, and where we are heading: “No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress...for like the days of the tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.”⁴

Last Sunday in the offertory I got a brief glimpse of that holy vision of God that sees wider than our present suffering. The piece began with God’s work of creation through evolution and spoke of the Spirit’s work of giving birth to the complexity and diversity of this world; of calming our weary ways with joy. It began with creation and moved us to the culmination of all time. I needed – I still need – to hold that vision of the wide view and the ever-present-always-working-hovering Spirit who will not leave us alone and will not let us be.

² Isaiah 65.18, NRSV

³ Isaiah 65.19, NRSV

⁴ Excerpts from Isaiah 65.19-22, NRSV

The gospel pulls us forward yet again 19 books and 570 years in time. Once again God's people are in distress, living in fear, longing to live free. The people are getting excited thinking that this is their time. They stand admiring the strength and beauty of the temple as the symbol of their hopes and dreams. Jesus says 'not so fast!' "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."⁵ And then he goes on to warn them that when that happens - and it happens over and over again - it will feel as if the end has come.

And then he gets personal. 'If you keep the wide view - if you place your hope in God and give yourself to this work of the Spirit to not let us be - to keep pulling us back from the brink of destruction and keep pushing us forward to the new life God has for us....it could very well cost you something.' In fact, standing up for what is right can put you into confrontation. And we need to be ready and willing to pay that price. In the middle of those confrontations comes a unique opportunity to testify and to bear witness to the vision of God and keep working to bring that vision to fruition. Then Jesus speaks a pastoral word to those who are weary of doing what is right: "By your endurance you will gain your souls."⁶

I have been watching and taking heart from the community of God's people who have been working really hard this week in the midst of a painfully divided nation to find the opportunity that Jesus speaks of us in this text to bear witness to our trust in God even if that witness comes through trembling lips. Do you know what I have heard over and over again? Now more than ever do we need to steward the gifts God has given us. Ok -- no one has actually said in that way. But it truly is the impact of what I've been hearing. I've heard people wanting to stay engaged politically and to steward civic responsibility between election cycles. People are looking to steward their time, their passion, their money for the sake of those who are most vulnerable among us. To build bridges of unity and peace and to ensure that any peace that is forged is built on justice.

⁵ Luke 21.6, NRSV

⁶ Luke 21.19, NRSV

So when students of color were being harassed on Hope College's campus this week, the Latino Student Union called the community to a peace circle in the Pine Grove on Friday. 500 people came out to stand hand-in-hand for 30 minutes in silence to bear witness to the truth of the gospel that we are one in Christ Jesus and to signal to those who think otherwise that we will stand with those who are being marginalized in our midst. And we will not let them be swept aside.

Jesus signals to any would-be disciples that the road ahead will not be easy. But giving up in despair is not an option. "By your endurance you will gain your souls." Stewardship is a season that invites our action pushing us to put our time and our gifts and our money where our mouth is. According to our texts, those moments of feeling as if the world has ended issues the very same call.

It can all feel so utterly exhausting. Which is why I appreciated an email that came into my inbox just before I shut down my computer for the night. It came from Lorilyn Wiering⁷, a spiritual director and founder of the Red Cord Ministry. She had a profoundly pastoral word that I needed to hear and so I am sharing it with you. It is entitled "What Jesus Teaches Us to Do with our Pain": "I've been repeating Fr. Richard Rohr's words a lot this week. *Pain not transformed is pain transmitted....Anger is often just one shielding layer above our lament....So, how, actually, does pain become transformed? Jesus models at least three ways.*"

I'm going to share briefly from two of them. "On the night that Jesus was betrayed he shared a meal, the Last Supper, with his disciples. He showed them what to do with their pain. By his example, he taught them to pour out their pain into a simple and sacred container and pass it around so all could taste it, could take into their own bodies. We follow Jesus' example when we pour into a simple and sacred circle of lament and healing the specificity of our pain, allowing our brothers and sisters to 'taste' it."

Then a little further reflecting on Holy Saturday when Jesus lay in the tomb she reflects: "The silence and space of Holy Saturday is nearly

⁷ Lorilyn Wiering's website for the Red Cord Ministry is: <http://redcordcommunity.org/>

unbearable...and will likely feel too long. Like winter, another of God's faithful texts...We need to embrace this time of lament and active waiting before moving too quickly into action. What happens in solitude and silence? An ontological miracle. Somehow, something that wasn't comes into being. A new way of being in the world emerges. From a tomb."

Friends we need each other when it feels like the world is ending. We need spaces for healing - sacred containers to pass and taste each other's pain. We do this so our pain can be transformed, so that we can be made ready when God calls into action.

Praise be to God that Her ever-present-always-working-hovering Spirit will not leave us alone and will not let us be.

Amen.