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Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost
November 17, 2019

Proper 28, Year C

Malachi 4:1-2a
Psalm 98
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13
Luke 21:5-19

With the one who holds the future

All Saints' Day in 1755 fell on a Saturday. This was back when All Saints' Day had not yet been eclipsed by its eve, Halloween, and was observed by a Christian Europe as one of the most important days on the calendar. In many places, families put candles in their windows as a sign of the occasion, rather like some people do now at Christmas. And, they all went to church, in this Christian age, in the morning, to celebrate.

About 9:30 in the morning, an earthquake with a magnitude between 8.5 - 9.0 occurred about 120 miles off the coast of southern Portugal. In Lisbon, as thousands packed the churches, the earth shook. The devastation was almost unimaginable. Eighty-five percent of Lisbon's buildings were destroyed. The ones that weren't directly destroyed by the earthquake burned in the subsequent fires; those candles in the windows to celebrate the day fell off and lit up unaccompanied houses. Many rushed to the coast to escape the blaze. As the sea withdrew, they could see the wrecks of ships on the newly revealed port bottom. Then, the sea returned as a tsunami, drowning many. As for the faithful Christians, as they worshiped in their beautiful Portuguese churches, many of them died when those beautiful churches fell in on them, just as they were praising God for his goodness. The surrounding countries felt the force of the quake or experienced the tsunamis that resulted; islands in the Caribbean reported waves over sixty-feet tall. The death toll from this earthquake, along with the subsequent fire and tsunami, is estimated to have been 40,000-50,000 people.

The effects were not only physical. The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 changed the course of European Enlightenment thought. Some of the greatest Western thinkers in history were doing their thinking at the time (Voltaire, Kant, Rousseau) and we have documents where they wrestle with what this event means. For many, it seemed like God himself had reached out and destroyed this storied European capital. It was a difficult project to square this event with thoughts about the goodness of creation and the goodness of God himself. The world of European thought after 1755 was different than the world before 1755. It shook these optimists to the core.

You could write a history of civilizations that traces events like this. It would be an incomplete history, but not inaccurate. It could be not just of natural disasters, but other kinds that shift some fundamental approach to the world for those who experience them. We could look at World War I this way. We could look back to the fall of Rome in the fifth century, when the world found out that the Eternal City was all too temporal, the seemingly invulnerable as vulnerable as anyone else. We could go back one thousand years before that, to the fifth century BC, when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians, and many of the Judeans were taken away, and by the waters of Babylon they sat down and wept. The people of Israel would never be the same.

In our reading from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus warns about another one of these events that would happen soon. In the twenty-first chapter, he and the disciples were in Jerusalem. While the

latter marveled at the beauty of the Temple, Jesus warned them: “The days will come when not one stone [of this Temple] will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” And so it was: in A.D. 70, Romans soldiers crushed a Jewish rebellion and destroyed this Temple that had stood for almost 500 years.

To understand the trauma of the destruction of the Temple, however, we must realize that the Temple wasn’t equivalent to a very beautiful church that we wouldn’t want to see destroyed, or even a very beautiful, very old church that stood as a monument to the faithfulness of those centuries of Jews (though it did that). By his own promise, the Temple was where God lived. Way back in the days of Moses, a thousand years before its original construction, God had given instructions about how his house was to be built, and that he would live there in a very real way. For the Temple to be destroyed was for God’s very presence to be disrupted. Not eradicated, obviously, but the trauma of this destruction would shake the Jew people to their very core and change Judaism forever. Regardless of the exact chronology of Lucan composition, we can say with confidence that when the early Church was reading Luke’s gospel, this destruction had already happened. This traumatic event had already shaken the faithful to the core.

You could write a history of civilization that traces events like this, but you could also write personal histories like this, too, about events that reorient our relationship to the world on a comprehensive way. Events that may even reorient our relationship to God.

What Jesus tells the disciples—what he tells us today—is that things like this will happen. The unimaginable events will occur. Even the centuries-old Temple will fall; the Eternal City will fall; the people in the land they had been promised would be sent away, into exile. We don’t know what the future holds.

What Jesus promises the disciples—what he promises us today—is that what is most important is not what the future holds, which we don’t know, but who holds the future, which we do. The Lord is the Lord of history, and the future is in his hands. And so the world may change, our lives may change; there may be wars and insurrections, false prophets and false messiahs, “dreadful portents and great signs from heaven,” and, yes, even devastating earthquakes. But the future is held by God.

Once you know that the future is held by God, then you can see how your present is held by God as well, at this very moment. Indeed, even in the moments of destruction, our lives are held close by God. When St. Paul is writing to the Colossians, he tells them, “your lives,” your real lives, “are hidden with Christ in God” (3:3). I love that phrase: “hidden with Christ in God.” “Hidden” means that it isn’t necessarily seen; just looking at you, you might not be able to tell. But even at this very moment, you are held safely by the one who created you, and loves you, and one day will bring you to himself. God is the one who one day will bring you home.

This world, he says, may not feel like home, because of wars and insurrections, earthquakes and fires. For Jesus himself, at the time of this reading, he is only days away from his own disaster. When he talks about being betrayed by friends, betrayed to death, he is talking about what will shortly happen to him. But this world of difficulty is not the world for which we are intended. It will not be our eternal home, the promised New Jerusalem. And, even now, our lives are hidden with Christ in God.

Does this mean, then, that we don’t have to care about what goes on in our own day? Do we become fatalists, resigned to the sad state of the world, and thus unresponsive? By no means! That seems to have been one of the problems with the Thessalonians in today’s reading as well as, in a different way, the Colossians. But, to the contrary, Paul tells both of them that now is precisely the time when you have to act the role of the faithful disciple, because in that way you are preparing yourself for heaven. Keep saying your prayers, don’t be idle, don’t lie to each other, don’t tear each other down, but rather treat one another with kindness and compassion and humility.

But also don't be surprised when the world is the way it is. After the terrible march in Charlottesville a few years ago, when Nazis with guns paraded through a quite lovely American city, and many reacted with shock and horror, a friend of mine (a black priest now in Texas) wrote, "To be surprised by the worldliness of the world is a form of disbelief." Don't be surprised by the worldliness of the world. There will be wars and insurrections, exiles and earthquakes, racists with guns. But, even as we engage with those things, we fix our sights on things above, to our heavenly home, while we also do all we can to combat injustice and alleviate poverty and act with kindness and compassion and humility today.

In a few weeks, we will begin the season of Advent. One of the major themes of Advent is the four last things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. For most of us, unlike brown paper packages tied up in string, these are not a few of our favorite things. But they are not to be dreaded. Rather, they are to be welcomed and celebrated. That is because the coming of Christ is the going-home of the Christian, to a world in which there are not wars and earthquakes, in which we eat from the tree of life, not the tree with the fruit of sin. We look east, toward that coming again, the coming to us that will take us home.

Take heart, Christians, and don't be afraid. We don't know what the future holds, but we know the one who holds the future, and we know that he loves us. Even now, even in the midst of the worldliness of the world, he holds us close, as our lives are hidden with him in God.