

23rd Sunday after Pentecost, November 8, 2020
Matthew 25:1-13, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ. In November every year, the lectionary turns our attention toward the end times. It will be the theme of our Gospel reading today and for the next four weeks as we move into the new church year. And each church year begins, you may know, with a focus on the end times. Last week, as we were all anxiously anticipating the end of voting in the presidential election, I mentioned how this election was being cast in apocalyptic terms. Both sides were suggesting that this was a life or death kind of election for our country, and if their opponent won it would be catastrophic for our future, a disaster we might not be able to recover from. Depending on who you supported in this election, and how much impact those dire warnings had on you, you might be tempted to think either that we dodged the proverbial bullet, or that the end is near. It took a long time for the winner of this election to become clear. Not as long as the election 20 years ago, to be sure, which took more than a month. But it was a long time, nonetheless, when we usually know the results sometime on the night of the election. As I thought in the past few days about how politically and culturally polarized our country is, and what message I might have especially for those distressed because their candidate lost, I decided that my message would actually be similar for both the losing and winning sides – two sides of the same coin, really. Whether you find yourself elated or dejected this morning, we should be clear that your preferred candidate is not the Messiah and his victory will not usher in the Kingdom of God. Nor will his defeat likely bring about the end of the world. But even if it does, as I said after the last election, our task as God’s people, even at the end of the world, is to remain faithful to our calling to be agents of God’s love and reconciliation in a world desperately in need of both, and in that way to prepare for our Lord’s return. As Martin Luther famously said, “if I knew the world was ending tomorrow, I would plant a tree.”

Whether or not this is the end times, and as I reminded us last week, that’s not information any of us gets to know in advance – not even Jesus... so, whether or not this is the end times, the end times are coming, sooner or later, and they are worth thinking about, especially since our readings our attention there. I’ll say a few words first about that Gospel reading about the bridesmaids, but then focus in on that second reading from Paul’s first letter to the church at Thessalonica, as clues for how we should think about the end times and how we should prepare for them.

First the bridesmaids. We wrestled with this text last Monday evening at On The Way, and we all agreed that it is hard to extract good news from this text. We didn’t like that the wise bridesmaids wouldn’t share with the foolish ones, and we didn’t like the finality of the foolish maidens being locked out of the wedding banquet, which we all took to be an analogy for God’s kingdom come. As I studied this text a bit more this week, I decided that I’m not sure the details here are meant to be mapped onto specific aspects of our life of faith. Martin Luther apparently on one occasion decided that the oil represented faith. The wise ones had it and the foolish ones didn’t. If that’s true, I’m not sure then what it means for the foolish bridesmaids to go into town to buy more oil. I think this text is making the more general points that Jesus is coming to usher in God’s kingdom, and that our anticipation of God’s kingdom, and our preparation for it, make a difference to God, to others in our lives, and to ourselves. In other words, how we spend our lives matters, and that would include our political involvements. I still think it’s possible, in spite of some alarming recent trends, for faithful Christians to support different political parties out of a desire to love and serve their neighbors and give glory to God. As we will see in two weeks when

we read from the end of this chapter in Matthew, it is that loving and serving of the neighbor that is the real preparation for God's kingdom. I also have an idea about why it was appropriate for the wise bridesmaids to refuse to share their oil, but I want to get to first Thessalonians before I run out of time. Come to adult Sunday School today at 10:45 and I'll tell you there.

So our Gospel reading tells us that God's kingdom is indeed coming and that we should prepare for it. Our second reading today tells us something important about what that coming kingdom will look like, and because of that it has some implications for what kind of preparations we should be making. I've spoken to you before about the popular belief among some Christians in the "rapture," when all the good Christians will suddenly be snatched up into heaven in order to spare them from those horrible and bloody disasters in the book of Revelation. Today's second reading is cited as one of the important sources for belief in the rapture. I've also mentioned that the rapture isn't really there in the Bible. It's an idea that seems to have some biblical support, if you pick unconnected details from very different parts of the Bible, but in reality it's a misinterpretation of the Bible that was thought up in nineteenth-century England. I've also mentioned, I'm sure, that this passage from 1 Thessalonians has nothing to do with that sort of "rapture."

Paul writes that at Jesus' coming at the end of the world, those of his followers who are still alive will join those of his followers who are dead, to meet Jesus in the sky. That kind of sound like the rapture, doesn't it? But then what? The text doesn't say. And so we assume they fly on up to heaven and stay there. What we moderns miss here is that this is a description of a royal visit in ancient times, when a king comes to stay in one of his cities. The living and the dead who go up in the air to meet Jesus in this telling are really a greeting party who go out to escort him to their home. Like you do when friends or relatives come for a stay. You meet them in the driveway and help them carry in their luggage. This fits with that final image in the book of Revelation that I mentioned last week, of the Holy City coming down from heaven and God coming to live with us here at the end of time. Notice the direction. In this vision we don't end up in heaven. God ends up here, and the Kingdom of Heaven is finally lived out here on Earth.

If these are faithful interpretations of the biblical text, then they have important implications for how we are to prepare for the end times. Think about it. If Jesus is coming in the end to snatch you up to heaven, then you don't have to worry about the Earth. You just leave. And until you leave you can cut down the forests, pollute the land, air, and water, and hunt its creatures to extinction. Who cares? It's all going to be destroyed anyway! But if Jesus is coming here to live, then preparing for Jesus' coming means taking care of the earth that is going to be our common home.

One of the hopeful things I've read in recent days is that the environment, including concern about global warming, is emerging as a bipartisan cause in this country, and there might now be some realistic prospects for positive change in this area, even if we are in for a couple of years of divided government. I hope that's true. I hope that we can come together on this issue. It's not going to be easy, and it will require some sacrifices. But by the grace of God, and with the eyes of faith, we can see this as an opportunity to repent of our selfish and destructive exploitation of the Earth's resources, to see care for the environment as part of our baptismal vocation, and an appropriate preparation for the coming kingdom of God. May God grant us such faith and such vision. May God grant our country healing, reconciliation, and a common passion for caring for the Earth in the months and years to come. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.