

Sermon for Pentecost 23c
Proper 28c
The Rev. Canon Raymond Raney
Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico
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Malachi 4:1-2a
Psalm 98
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13
Luke 21:5-19

I remember a line from the second Star Trek movie.
It was the justification for an impossible task from which there was no survival.
“How you deal with death is as important as how you deal with life.”

We hang on to life so tightly that our knuckles turn white.
When death comes to us or to those we love, we find out just how much we love life ... so much that we cling to every moment as if it were the air we breathe.

I remember a woman I met when I worked as a chaplain at Presbyterian Hospital.
She was a minister, and had spent ten years fighting ovarian cancer. She had gone through four courses of chemotherapy.
Most of her internal organs were failing.
After talking with her for a while, I asked her what she wanted to pray for.
“I’ve spent the last four weeks being an absolute bitch to everyone I love. I don’t want to live the days I have like that.
I want to be able to tell them how much I love them.
I want a good death.”

What she wanted was to be able to wait for the end with grace.
And that’s what we prayed for, for an end filled with God’s grace. That’s the end we hear about in the Psalm.

Shout with joy to the Lord, all you lands;
Lift up your voice, rejoice, and sing.

Let the sea make a noise and all that is in it,
The lands and those who dwell therein.

Let the rivers clap their hands,
And let the hills ring out with joy before the Lord,
When he comes to judge the earth.

The Psalm would certainly make Malachi happy.
The end would take care of that animosity people held on to toward the unrighteous.
They’ll get there’s, all those happy arrogant people and prospering evil doers.

And it will make the Thessalonians who've stopped working happy because the end is coming right now.

And it will make the disciples happy because the Lord returns now – no more waiting for the end, and no more persecutions.

We have to look at each of the readings today in their original context.

Like most of the books of the Old Testament, we don't know who wrote the book of Malachi, or when it was written.

Most scholars believe the book was written around the time of Israel's return from captivity in Babylon,

after the Temple was restored,

and the leaders have returned to their old tricks:

not taking care of those who need taking care of.

Malachi is reassuring the righteous that there will be a reckoning.

The letter to the Thessalonians admonishes the community to remember that the coming end is not an excuse to stop contributing to the fellowship.

“Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.”

It sounds harsh, but it's what Paul wants people to realize,

as Yogi Berra said: “It ain't over till it's over.”

Thessalonians was the first letter written by Paul around 50 AD, when he was convinced that Christ was coming back next week. Kind of like the bumper sticker, “Jesus is coming: Look Busy.”

Many of the Thessalonians were convinced by Paul's preaching,

and they saw no sense in working if everything's coming to an end. Paul's message was to keep working up to the end,

God don't want no shirkers.

Luke is writing around 80 AD.

Here we see Jesus prophesying the destruction of the temple.

That happened at 70 AD when the Romans burned Jerusalem and pulled the walls down.

When the disciples asked for a sign,

Jesus could have said, when you see Romans running around with torches.

What Jesus tells them, however, to wait, and be wary.

We all have to wait. For what, you may ask. To wait for the end.

The interesting thing about Malachi is that it's the last book of the Christian Old Testament.

Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.

Those are the last two sentences of the Old Testament.
In the Christian tradition, Elijah comes in the form of John the Baptist to gather the righteous and proclaim the coming of Jesus – the Messiah.
And Jesus proclaims what will befall his followers with reassurance that they will not perish.

So today we heard translated words that echo out from two millennia ago talking about a time that has yet to arrive,
and in two weeks we will embrace that time as Advent.
If this was what the words meant then,
what might these words mean now – for us?

The destruction of the temple seems to be the focus of both the Old Testament and Gospel readings.
All the time in Babylon, the people yearned for their return to Jerusalem and the Temple.
And when the Temple is restored,
the Temple itself becomes more important than the well-being of the people the priests of the Temple are to serve.
God was identified with the Temple rather than the people.

That's the genius of the prophecy of Jesus that the Temple will be destroyed.
The whole of Jesus' ministry was based on the importance of people and their relationship with God.
That's what Jesus proclaims to his disciples that they are to witness to those in power the importance of their relationship with God and God's relationship with people.

That's the problem with the Thessalonians.
Those who hang on to the expectation of the end times forget their responsibility to their community and to each other.
The community needs all its people participating.

The readings today caution us to examine our lives to find what it is that we hang on to that isn't God's.

The Collect today prays that we realize what it is we've been given:

“Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life...”

We're told in the Scriptures that there are two great commandments:
Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength, and Love your neighbor as yourself.”

We see God in other people,
and we love God by loving other people and caring for them.

That's what life is about;
that's what we're to hang on to with all our might.

