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Propers 28 (Pentecost 26) Series C 2016

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Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – November 13

For those of you interested arcane things, this is the penultimate Sunday of the church year. Last Sunday, Nov 10, was the ante-penultimate Sunday of the church year. I find that this is an excellent way to avoid conversation at the endless round of Christmas parties that one has to attend in the coming months. If you start throwing around words like “penultimate” and “ante-penultimate,” pretty soon, you can drink your punch in peace. (I am thinking about writing a book entitled “A Misanthrope’s Guide to the Holidays.”)

Actually, the words simply mean “second to the last” and “third to the last” and refer to the fact that we are coming very close to the last or ultimate Sunday of the Church year, often called Christ the King or Sunday of the Fulfillment. As we come to the end of one year and the beginning of the next. Our attention is drawn toward the end of things, including the end of this world. The Christian message on this is grossly misunderstood in the world around us. We are rather like the grump sitting in the corner drinking his punch and wishing he were somewhere else. Christians have a bad rap when it comes to the end of the world. The truth be told, if you ever do get to talk to the guy nursing his punch in the corner of the party, you might find that he is actually pretty interesting. What is more, if humanity would talk about the end honestly, we might find it to be a really interesting, even comforting. Christianity bears some responsibility here. Some have used the end of the world to gin up fear simply to open up wallets. They have taught a distorted doctrine of the end of the world. But many of us have not talked about the end of the world at all and thus left a void in what people understand and thereby a beachhead for false teaching.

First the misunderstanding: Most of the world thinks that the Christians have a fire and brimstone scenario for the end of the world. We are cast as being fearfully anticipating a terrible day when God will come and destroy everything and then we get to go to heaven and we think everyone should be as afraid of this as we are. Worse, we are sometimes thought to be gleefully anticipating the end of the world, just hoping we get to see the other guys frying in hot grease.

But this all misses some very critical points. First of all, the end of the world conversation in the Bible is almost always couched within a certain context, namely persecution and oppression. The people of God do not hear Him speak a message about the end until they are under considerable stress. John wrote revelation in a time persecution, the apocalyptic sections of the OT are written in terrible times of exilic oppression for God’s people. Even Malachi here is in a pretty tough spot. This creates an interesting dynamic for the end of the world talk. The people are already afraid. They don’t need to be made more afraid. In fact, when look at it closely, all the end of the world talk in the Bible is designed to comfort people who are already afraid. It is not designed to further terrorize them. Eschatological discourse tries to get a handle on fear, not increase it.

So when God talks about coming down and stomping on all the bad guys, that is actually good news for the folks upon whom the bad guys are themselves stomping. It means that God will intervene and destroy our oppressors. If you are running for your life, that message takes on a

wholly different dimension from hearing those same words while you are guzzling praise songs in the comfort of your sanctuarium on a sunny day in America. The fact that we don't hear these words in a context of persecution means that we may have fundamentally misunderstood them. The message of the end is one of comfort. God comes to rescue his people, the good news needs to predominate in all this, and that can be tough, especially when the bad news is very real as well. God does come, and he does deal with evil.

But we also have to be a little careful here. The persecutors are the ones who end up getting stomped on. That is not everyone. Indeed, it might be a startlingly small group of people. What does the text actually say about my unbelieving neighbor? I would really like it to speak a message of hope and joy to him, but it really doesn't say as much as you might think about him if he comes to that last day as someone other than a believer or a persecutor. I cannot really and definitively speak of his eternal suffering or his bliss.

On this Sunday after a brutal election season do we need to talk about what happens after the apocalypse? Is it time to consider life after the end of the world? Are the losers in this election thinking in apocalyptic, end-of-the-world terms?

Collect of the Day

O Lord, almighty and ever-living God, You have given exceedingly great and precious promises to those who trust in You. Rule and govern our hearts and minds by Your Holy Spirit that we may live and abide forever in your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Almighty and ever-living God – He has all the power and he does not die (at least not since that Good Friday thing, but more about that later.) For the persecuted Christian this is actually pretty good news. My persecution is not happening because of a failure on God's part nor as a result of God's death. Nietzsche was wrong. God is not dead. Of course, that is not what Nietzsche meant anyway.

You have given exceedingly great promises – a great promise I can understand, but how does a promise become exceedingly great? Exceeding what? The promises of God exceed what? Our faith? Our imagination? Our needs?

As this prayer has come up over the years we have put our heads together and came up with a list of some of these exceedingly great promises. Do they still ring true today? All of these are essential to talk about the end of the world. We thought the preacher might just read the Gospel lesson with its chaotic and wild picture of the end of the world. That makes us anxious, but the collect urges us to remember the amazing promises of God. The preacher might just read these and offer a brief commentary. Would that be a sermon for a people who are anxious and afraid, after this election, in the face of the world's end?

- 1. I am with you always, even to the end of the age/earth*

2. *I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me shall not die.*
3. *The peace of God which passes human understanding, keeps you with Christ Jesus (this is a Holy Spirit action.)*
4. *God's word is faithful and true – he is Truth and therefore he will not lie to me.*
5. *My name is inscribed on his hand – he will never forget me. Isaiah 49:16*
6. *When we eat this bread and drink this wine, Christ himself comes into us, the whole of Christ and he makes us righteous and holy.*
7. *God, who never slumbers or sleeps, watches over our coming and going from this day forth and forever more Psalm 121.*
8. *God will always love me despite myself and that love means life eternal. Nothing can separate us from the love of God – Romans 5 and 8.*
9. *God loves the entire creation – He notes/cares about the death of a sparrow Colossians 1, Matthew 6:25, Romans 8*
10. *God will wipe away every tear Isaiah 25 and Revelation 7:17 and 21:4*
11. *God's ears are always tuned to my prayers. He always listens to me.*
12. *The Devil will not win, Jesus does. God promises that! The gates of hell will not withstand the assaults of God's church.*
13. *Jesus is the good shepherd who watches over every moment of your life. John 10*
14. *Jesus is the bread of life – he who comes to Jesus does not hunger. He supplies my needs of body and more important my needs of soul, feeding me with his very self – a sacramental promise.*
15. *Jesus is the vine that supplies your very essence, your being. Hence we are promised that we will bear fruit. He will prune us, true, and that may hurt, but we will be fruitful. John 15*
16. *Jesus, the incarnate presence of God, is the way, the truth and the life, through Him and His work, life itself comes to us. John 11*
17. *God will give all the bad guys their just desserts, He will work justice in the earth. (Be careful here, we don't know the extent of this or the ways of God in bringing salvation even to the worst of us – remember the one about loving me despite myself.)*
18. *The kingdom of heaven belongs to little children – indeed it is as helpless infants that we have any hope of eternal. Mark 10*
19. *God works his kingdom and its blessing through the difficulties of life. Nothing can ever happen to us that is bigger than his redemption.*

20. *Jesus will on the last day judge us and all humanity – by the work of his cross.*

That last promise probably needs a little attention on our part in this season of the last things in which we find ourselves. Is it good news or bad news? Here is the point at which I think much of the world gets the Christian message wrong. For the believer, on the last day, God will not judge my life but he will judge Christ's life given to me – holy and perfect. What does a judge do? He determines sentence, not guilt. The evidence determines guilt. On that last day, the prosecutor (Satan) will present the evidence and before that we will have to admit our guilt. The judge will turn to us, pull up His sleeves and look at the holes in His hands and say "this looks like enough punishment to me."

Another way to think about a judge is probate court. If I appear before a probate judge because some long lost aunt has named me in a will, am I afraid? Appearing before that judge could very well be good news. The judgment at the last day is often described as Christ rendering the judgment which is our inheritance. He is more like a probate judge than a criminal judge.

I am not sure that God's people have not imported some dross into their expectations about the end of the world. I wonder if the promises that God has offered are not so great that we have substituted something a little more reasonable to get him off the hook. Perhaps we want to make it simply a little more understandable. In any event, when we come to the end of the world, what we are looking for will say much about the God we believe in. Is he the God of vengeance? Is he the God of mealy-mouthed pseudo-justice? Is he the God who rights all the wrongs or just perpetrates another set of wrongs visited upon the world? Is he the God of great joy? Is He the God of great peace?

Rule and govern our hearts and minds – that is a tall order. Are we really praying that God would do a little mind control here? Does our human nature not rebel at the very thought of it? And yet, is not my heart and mind, my fear and imagination of what might happen, really the problem that many of this nation's Christians face when contemplating the end of the world? Mention the end of the world and our imaginations tend to run wild. This is only abetted by the apocalyptic images which fill our TV and cinema screens. Our minds need a measure of governing and rule. Discipline I think is the word we are looking for here. How does God do this? What does it feel like to be disciplined by God in heart and mind? How does this happen?

We ask this so that we may live and abide forever in the Son. Notice that this is not a future tense sort of request. The living and abiding is a present reality. We already abide in Him. The end of the world is not the great disjuncture with the present reality that many make it out to be. Yes, there is a great change that we will see, but some things are not going to change. After all, God will not love us more in the afterlife than he does here. We will be no more his children, perhaps we will act more like his children, but we will no more be his children than we are right now. (it is a little like being a little married or a little pregnant, those are really yes and no sorts of questions.)

This rule of heart and mind is to keep us there. This is the work of the Spirit in the third article of the creed. He keeps the whole Christian church on earth with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. This is a work of God, not of the Christian, although it often is perceived that way.

Malachi 4:1-6

“For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. ² But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. ³ And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts.

⁴ “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.

⁵ “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶ And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

Should we do a children’s lesson on this? We could simply have a sack full of cookies in our hand when we come before the kids. We would then ask why we light an oven. We do it because we want to back something. We often think only of the destruction that is the end of the world, but God wants us to see past that heat and flame. Ovens are usually lit because we want something sweet and good to come out of it, perhaps a cookie, perhaps a loaf of bread. Is that another way to cast Malachi’s words here? Is this oven lit for our benefit? That seems rather callous when we think of the arrogant and evildoers, but the stubble which burns in the oven is baking bread. The end of the world is not only something to be afraid of. Malachi seems to urge us who believe to look forward to it. Does that work?

This is one of those passages that at first seem to suggest that the end is a time of God’s wrath against all the people. But look at verse 2. That is Malachi’s audience. They go out of the stalls leaping like a calf. If you have never seen this, it is quite dramatic. We used to have a few calves when I was a child and they would be kept in stalls through the winter. When spring came and we let them out, they would go jumping around the pasture. In fact, they would be something of a danger to themselves, capable of injuring themselves in their exuberance. It was fun to watch them, but one needed to watch them because they could hurt themselves too.

Near Keene NH Steve tells us that a local dairy actually publicizes the release of their heifers in the spring. You can see a video of this on the web here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TellanT_AGU

How could we update this image of the calf? Could we talk about the Cubs fans who have finally won the World Series? We have all seen the photos of the chaos which ensued. I might simply

point out that the good people of Kansas City were far more sedate in their celebration last year, but that could reveal far more about my baseball loyalties than anything else. No many of us are around calves in the spring. Could we talk about an exuberant puppy/dog? The preacher might want to ask where we see uncontrolled joy and happiness in our lives and experiences.

In verse three he explains that joy. The wicked will be trodden under our feet like ashes. Those who look so strong as they oppress us today will not be so strong then. Of course the problem with all this is that we are not really being oppressed by such an enemy today, at least not obviously. We sit in relative freedom in our churches. No one is telling us to stop. We do not have soldiers arresting our pastors and no members of our congregations languish in jail or face execution for what we believe. At most our experience of persecution is the eye-rolling of our teenage children and the fact that this culture simply ignores us. That may change and some think it is right now with some of the actions taken by the government.

But just because we are in a comfortable enough spot that we might argue about whether we are persecuted or not does not mean we do not have an enemy. It means he is working far more subtly, and perhaps more like it was in the time of Malachi. Malachi may not have actually lived at a time of violent persecution, but a much more subtle and acidic attack on the faith of his people. Is our oppression just as real and more deadly for its subtlety? How does it get expressed? Is it a culture that has made it gauche to speak of God at the Christmas party? If you really want to be left alone at that Christmas party, forget using big words like “penultimate.” You can just about guarantee isolation if you simply start talking about the one who was born in that manger, the Christ whose name is in the holiday’s name. Even at the church Christmas party you might find folks rolling their eyes. “Do we always have to bring that up?”

Is our enemy the oppression of a media driven culture that does not persecute us as much as it simply ignores us. When I was a child the tallest structures in town were the steeples, the water tower and the grain elevator. That had some tremendous implications for preaching sacramental theology. Here was cross, water and bread in everyone’s view. As we look out over our own landscape today, does Christianity even register a blip on the radar of most people? Have our steeples disappeared from the skyline in a sense? Has it been replaced by the towers of banks and the high rise apartments of the self-absorbed? Does Christianity ever even show up in the films and television shows we watch, the books we read, or the papers to which we subscribe? If it does are we glad for the portrayal? I am not sure that I can find it very often, or if I do it is a nicely contained little bit in the living section of the Saturday paper, handily circumscribed within its boundary. When does the word have its free course? When is it allowed to challenge my life? When do I stand shivering before it?

In the last verse we get this enigmatic statement about turning members of families back to each other. Does this last verse mean a restoration of basic relationships? Is it about the family that prays together stays together? Is this descendants connected with ancestors (All Saints sort of thing)? Is this Malachi’s concern? Does the preacher do well to talk family here as though the

end of family is the end of the world? Arguably the world will be in serious distress if family dissolves.

The result of this is even odder. Is Malachi suggesting that God won't destroy this world? Is this simply God reserving the creator's right? He made it, he can destroy it. These are the very last words in the Christian OT. But interestingly it is not the last word in the Jewish ordering of the OT. The last book in the Jewish OT is Chronicles which ends with the people of God in Exile. The Christian ends his OT looking for this messiah, this messenger, this one who is to come. The Jewish reader ends his text with the people in an exile they deserved, finding their salvation in the community of God's exiled people.

Psalm 98

Oh sing to the LORD a new song,
for he has done marvelous things!
His right hand and his holy arm
have worked salvation for him.

²The LORD has made known his salvation;
he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.

³He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness
to the house of Israel.

All the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.

⁴Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises!

⁵Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody!

⁶With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD!

⁷Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who dwell in it!

⁸Let the rivers clap their hands;
let the hills sing for joy together

⁹before the LORD, for he comes
to judge the earth.

He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.

If you want to do a really interesting seasonal disconnect with this psalm, sing Isaac Watt's metrical paraphrase of it. It is "Joy to the World" which we usually sing at Christmas. If you want to get the real sense of the anticipation that Christians have about their rescue on that last day, about the closest you can get is the anticipation of Christmas.

Notice in this psalm and the hymn the strange use of the judgment imagery at the end. Everyone is happy because God is judging. Not quite the expected response when we announce that God the Judge of all is on the way. Do we miss the Biblical message if we expect people to be afraid of that? If we insist people be afraid of that? See the notes on judgment and God's strange judgment of his own work which we propose above. Is that the reason the world rejoices in the judgment of God? Is he judging not our sins but his sacrifice and is that judgment rendered simply that his sacrifice is sufficient?

II Thessalonians 3:(1-5) 6-13

Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, ² and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. ³ But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. ⁴ And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command. ⁵ May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

⁶ Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. ⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸ nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. ⁹ It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. ¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. ¹¹ For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. ¹² Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

¹³ As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. ¹⁴ *If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed.*

¹⁵ *Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.*

¹⁶ *Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all.*

¹⁷ *I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write.* ¹⁸ *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.*

When we discussed this in the past, we thought that this text was important because it talked about urgency. Notice that Paul wants the Gospel to haste/speed along. This is best when you take it all together. Notice the main point. Pray that the word may speed ahead and be honored. There is a real sense of urgency to Paul's writing and preaching. He believes the time is short and the Word of God needs to "speed" ahead. The rest of this is about how this hastening works. God establishes us and we imitate those who have gone before us in the industrious pursuit of that which God has set before us. We do not grow weary of doing good. This is the faithful waiting upon the Lord. Such waiting is fruitful and centered on the preaching/teaching of the Word. Such waiting is not wearisome, or at least it does not grow weary, because it is born of a loving heart. You do not grow weary and give up waiting for the folks whom you love to show up for the holidays. You wait, you make ready, you grow in expectation as the day of their flight's arrival draws near. You could do worse than that for a sermon.

The fruitful waiting is not defined by our fear but by the opportunities which abound for us. The fear which the neighbor feels about global warming might be the best entrance we have into his life. In this sense Al Gore got the Nobel Peace prize (from Norwegian Lutherans if you will) because he is an apocalyptic prophet of doom. The Christian answer, instead of making us more afraid is to say that God intervenes to stop the wanton destruction of his good creation, and especially the destruction of His people. That doesn't mean we just hasten on down to the local car dealer and buy the biggest gas guzzler we can find. But we also don't imagine that we are the ones who will fix this broken world either. The visible dissolution of creation gives us hope, not despair. Christians are rather odd in this regard. They watch the news and see all the terrible things which everyone does and experiences. But while we share in the grief and horror of what we watch, we also look at it and notice that Jesus died for all these things. His Parousia is the occasion of the wiping away of these tears. We look forward with eager longing for that day.

Paul speaks a harsh word of judgment on us here too. When I was in Utah I was regularly told by my congregants that the Mormons did so much because they did it out of a works-righteousness motive. They were earning points for God. But if they had the wrong motive, how was it, I wondered, that we who had the right motivation did not do more? True, they had a poor motive to do what they did, but our failure to do more than they did with a poor motive seems to me to be a faith shortfall on our part. The Gospel still energizes and calls people; if we are not called and energized I think we have a serious set of questions to ask ourselves.

This waiting is not donning some white robe and standing out on a hill idly gazing into the sky. The man who will not work should expect to feel the pinch of hunger. Paul made tents, tirelessly traveled, preached and taught. He writes from Athens where he has brought the Gospel just recently. We wait by being productive, we wait by serving and loving and doing the good which does not weary us. Paul has set an example for us to follow, but so have the many folks who have gone before us, parents and grandparents, heroes of ministry and service.

Luke 21:5-28 (29-36)

⁵ And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, ⁶ “As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” ⁷ And they asked him, “Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?” ⁸ And he said, “See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is at hand!’ Do not go after them. ⁹ And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once.”

¹⁰ Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. ¹¹ There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. ¹² But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. ¹³ This will be your opportunity to bear witness. ¹⁴ Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, ¹⁵ for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. ¹⁶ You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. ¹⁷ You will be hated by all for my name's sake. ¹⁸ But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹ By your endurance you will gain your lives.

²⁰ “But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. ²¹ Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, ²² for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. ²³ Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. ²⁴ They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

²⁵ “And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, ²⁶ people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

²⁹ And he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. ³⁰ As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³⁴ “But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. ³⁵ For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Lost in all the talk about the gory details of the last day, is the simple admonition that when all this garbage starts to happen, we lift our heads and keep an eye out for help, because help is on the way (vs. 28.) I would have you notice this is not about getting afraid. The audience is already afraid. Chances are, there will be plenty of things to be afraid of that day. This is about putting all the things that are making us afraid in perspective. When it looks bad, that is when the strong Savior will make his appearance and he is always bigger than the bad guys. When we are in some trouble, he is liable to come and rescue us, so look up; you might just get to see him coming.

Just like watching the fig trees set leaf, bloom, and bear their fruit, we can watch the times and know that God is drawing nearer with every tragedy, with every bad thing that happens. Christ comes to rescue his people. I think this is the point that so many Christians actually miss here. The trigger point of the end of the world is our distress. Christ comes on that last day to save his people when it looks like there is no way for them to be saved. Is that how we see his coming? I think we believe he is coming in wrath because we have messed up. In truth, he comes to defend and rescue us.

This passage is broken into two parts that are helpful to note. The first section, much larger, is devoted to the destruction of the temple, an event that happened in the year 70 AD. The rest of the section, starting at verse 25 seems to direct our attention to the end of the whole cosmos. The world’s ending is also dramatic, but by confusing the two, we may be led to some rather common misconceptions, including the ever popular “Left Behind” silliness.

As we talked about this in the past we have wondered what it was Jesus was enjoining us to do in the last verses. Jesus says we should watch ourselves lest we be weighed down, etc., and he enjoins us to pray and seek God’s help. What does Jesus want us to do? What is it that makes us vulnerable to the end of the world snapping upon us like a trap? We thought that the focus needs to be on God, not the stuff of life. We can get very focused on the apparatus of Church, the meetings, boards, structures, and forget that the real purpose of church is the proclaiming of the Kingdom.

What shall we do with the comment that this generation shall not pass away before they have seen this transpire. When Luke wrote there were a few eye witnesses left. We believe the last of them died in the last decade of the first century, perhaps in the first decade of the second. Papias who writes in the 140’s is quoted in Eusebius mentions that he had seen some of these eye witnesses when he was a young man. Of course we live two thousand years later. We are 80 generations distant from the eye witnesses. We could simply say that they did “see” it when they

died and went to heaven, but that sounds like a cop-out to me. We could suggest that they misunderstood this passage/saying of Jesus. But I wonder if in fact they did not see these things taking place. But we will have to admit that they probably did not recognize all of them when they happened. Jesus did come in word and sacrament. They did see the new kingdom come when Jesus wore a crown of thorns and ruled from a cross. Do we see the same Kingdom today and miss it? Is that another cop-out excuse for Jesus words here? This is a very difficult passage for the believer because it really looks like Jesus got it wrong. How we handle that will speak volumes about us.

We thought that the preacher would want to talk about the end of the world quite frankly here. Christians have not done enough of that and as a result Hollywood has picked upon the unarticulated fears of people and talked a great deal about apocalyptic scenarios. Horrible monsters rising from the sea, aliens descending from the skies, floods, and diseases and all the various elements of the apocalypse which are recorded in John find vivid portrayals in the films we watch. But nowhere does the Christian raise up his voice of hope. It is true that the end of the world will be violent and terrible, but Jesus enjoins us to lift up our heads and rejoice because all this means our salvation is near. Do our people trust that? Shouldn't they trust that promise? How can we preach that consolation to them?

Law

1. The opposite of perfect love is not hatred, but fear. While we are enjoined to fear and love God in the commandments and while fear is the beginning of wisdom, it is hardly the end of it. Any approach to God which ends in fear is fundamentally flawed.
2. Much of current discourse on the end of the world is essentially structured on being afraid, fear. The whole gist of the “Left Behind” series or Hal Lindsey’s “Late Great Planet Earth” or the more contemporary prophets of ecological doom, seem intent on making us afraid. They make a great deal of money off your fear.
3. There is in fact much of which we may be afraid. And that is not entirely irrational fear. Families do not seem healthy and fruitful places to live. Too often they are occasions when folks get mean. Can we really survive as a species without the basic building block of family in which our children can be raised to be healthy adults? The ice caps may indeed melt and the climate may go haywire. We may start growing bananas to go with our strawberries in Portland; that is if we are not first inundated with sea water. But any theology or world view that is predicated on being afraid has missed the real point.
4. This fearfulness has too often infected the preaching of Christians when it comes to the end of the world. We have failed to see the opportunity that Jesus points to in the

Gospel reading. As a result our beautiful message of Christ's rescue has been muted. The world thinks we are looking forward to a terrible thing, when in fact we are looking for the return of our savior. They don't see us lifting our heads and rejoicing at the coming of our savior.

5. Our own parishioners may be confused and frightened by this, resulting in their own silence. Who wants to talk about something so negative? Yet, without the eschatological piece, much of the NT message is unintelligible. Paul thought the world would end "soon." The Christians of the first century prayed "Maranatha" or "Come Lord Jesus" and they did not just do so as a table prayer! They earnestly prayed for the end of the world. To modern ears this sounds nuts.
6. We are often faced with a false choice that is no choice. On one hand we have fundamentalist extremism and on the other scientific materialism. The fundamentalists tell us that our hope is entirely located outside this world. The materialist tells us that this world is all we get. Yet both of them seem intent on denying the incarnational reality of Jesus in this world, loving this world.

Gospel

1. Jesus says "lift up your heads, your salvation draws near." God comes to save us. He loves us and is very concerned about what happens to us. The incarnation is God's assertion that the events of this world are not beneath him, or a matter of some indifference. How you fare as a human being is of tremendous importance and concern to him.
2. That love and concern empowers our witness. Paul says God wants this word out there Jesus reminds us that even times of persecution are opportunities for us. The fear which the world around us feels is a great occasion to proclaim the message of peace and love that God has given us. He has uniquely prepared people though fear to love him.
3. As the people of God in the midst of the suffering of the world, we too know the oppression of death, of sin, and our mortal enemy, sometimes more acutely than the people of the world. **But no matter how tough it gets, we can always say that our salvation is bigger than the problem.** Even when it all seems to be crashing down around us, God's salvation is still bigger, in fact, as things get worse, we get more excited. Jesus is in a very real way closer to us in our suffering than when times are good. He rescues his suffering people.
4. As we see the bad stuff going on, we have a great message for the folks who suffer with us. As we see thing seemingly circling one last time before they finally get flushed away, we do not lose hope. God is a great snatcher of victory from defeat.

Just notice that whole cross thing. When all seemed darkest he was doing his best work. To every rational eye, that day Jesus looked like the loser.

5. In fact, that cross thing is very important. Our king reigns from a cross. That message will need to be highlighted next week, but you might want to prepare for it this week. His glory is to wear a crown of thorns and on a Friday we call God to save the world through what looks to be a terrible loss.

Sermon Themes

1. Like Calves from the Stall (That the hearer would rejoice at the good news that Jesus reappears on the last day to save his people from all their oppressors)

This sermon wants our hearers to say that when Jesus comes again, that will be a great day. This sermon would take head on the fear that most folks feel when the subject of the end of the world comes up. Between apocalyptic movies and lurid novels of the end of the world, we have come to the conclusion that this is only something to be afraid. Too often our Bibles which were addressed to people in dreadful situations are read out of context and contribute to this fear.

God does not want us to be afraid of the end. He repeatedly tells us that. Jesus warns us about it, but urges us not to fear.

We can argue for a confidence on that day, but honestly, fear is so irrational of an emotion, I would not recommend that. I think you need to mention the good reasons that we have not to be afraid, but don't expect to rationally argue someone into the joyful confidence which these texts enjoin upon us. It just doesn't work that way.

Rather, this is a sermon to preach God's love. The fearful child who rests in his parents arms, after a night terror is comforted not by the logic of the parents words, but by the strong and familiar arms which enfold him. Likewise our parishioners will need to be reminded that the same God who has watched over them, who has cared for them, who has helped them through their difficult times is the one who comes on that last day. The Jesus who died for their sins, who poured out His Spirit, who has made a solemn promise to walk with us every day and shepherd us with his rod and staff to comfort us, that Jesus is the one who comes back. He looked into your eyes on the day of your baptism and has known you ever since. He has forgiven all your sins and wept with you on the sad days and rejoiced with you on the glad days. He will never leave you, he has never left you. The last day is not the arrival of some fearsome other, but the appearing of a familiar friend, One who has been with you your whole life.

Yes, there will be lots of frightening things. the Bible is clear about that, but the One who descends on the clouds, with ten thousand angels on either side, he is the one who feeds

you today, who has washed you in this water, who speaks to you in this word, who listens intently to every prayer you speak and who sits at the end of your bed watching over you as you sleep. That Jesus has promised one day to show himself for all the world to see. Every knee will bow, some in fear and trepidation, it is true. But others, folks like us, will see his face and recognize in His words and his love, the one who has always been there with us, our Savior.

Perhaps one could simply list out some or all of the promises which are made above. You could include them in an insert to the bulletin and leave some blank spots on the bottom so they could add a few more promises that mean a great deal to them. You could even end the sermon by simply asking the congregants to mention the promises of God that help them look forward to that last day instead of only dreading it. That would likely be a great help to those who struggle with this.

2. Waiting on the Lord (Epistle: That the hearer would engage in active waiting upon Jesus – serving and witnessing tirelessly because they are serving the One who loves them and whom they love.)

This sermon really makes a pun on the word “wait.” We use that word in two different ways. On one hand we often wait for things quite passively. We wait in the doctor’s office, we wait for our car to be done in the shop, we wait for our kids to get out of school, and we wait for weekend to come.

But there is another form of that word, which actually comes from another root but which results in an identical spelling. We can wait on someone, as in a waiter, as in a restaurant. The Christian who is waiting on Jesus is really a waiter, someone who is also defined by their service. So waiting on the Lord could take on a whole new meaning.

Paul enjoins us to lives of active waiting. Jesus does too, even Malachi would have us eagerly and actively wait for God. Our situation is a little different from Paul’s. There his people seem to have misunderstood his discussion of the end of the world. They thought it would happen next week so they stopped making their car payments, figuring that when Jesus comes all the debts are off. We have misunderstood the promise of the end another way, but both misunderstandings have resulted in our inactivity. We have tended to think that it is never coming so there is no urgency to our waiting.

Waiting for God is not stopping activity, in not doing what God has for us to do. Real waiting on Jesus is to be engaged in this world, in our families, our jobs, our neighborhoods, and the like as a form of waiting, both for Jesus and upon Jesus. This will be great empowered if the preacher remembers that Jesus is present in this world. The last day is not the day Jesus finally gets here, it is the day that the corruption and brokenness of sin is swept away revealing him who has always been here.

For right now, that means we can catch a glimpse of the present Christ in the faces of the hungry and suffering people. He is also to be seen in the hands and the words of the folks who help them. He is in the persecuted Christians, he is in worshiping community, he is in the one who forgives sins, and many more. Part of the reason for our sloth, I am convinced, is that we have imagined Jesus is sitting on a throne far, far away, in some heavenly realm. Truly he is everywhere, and hence there too, but most importantly for me and my life, he is right here, right now. He is in your face when you speak loving words to me, especially words of forgiveness (Genesis 33:10.)

It is wearisome to wait for something, especially when we are not sure what exactly it is. I think of the people who await test results after a doctor's visit. If they are afraid of what those results will say, it is stressful and can at times be difficult. We wish we had more information about this end of the world, about this day of our salvation and joy. We know Jesus will appear on that day, we know that he will rescue us, but we also know that it will be a time of great difficulty, and the Bible tells us that many terrible things will take place. Our waiting for that day is often filled with anxiety.

God answer to us is that we need to worry about the things which are before us, and leave the big things in his capable hands. We trust him, his promises. Fretting about the end of the world will make it no better and will make us much less capable as His servants. But more than that, God does not want us to be afraid. That means we can tell the man or woman who seeks to make us afraid to take a hike. It also means that we can encounter Christ when we roll up our sleeves and attend to the good work which he has given us to do. Jesus calls upon us to be engaged in our jobs, in our families, and in our whole lives because Jesus has come into the flesh and rendered those whole lives significant and meaningful. The cup of cold water given to a little one is given to him. Visiting the person imprisoned in a nursing home by a body which has failed them is visiting Jesus. We don't have to wait for him to come, as if he is not here. We wait best for Jesus when we encounter our beloved in waiting upon Him!

3. Rejoice – the Judge draws near! (Psalm – that the Holy Spirit would fill the hearer with holy joy at the promise of Christ's appearing.)

The psalmist seems a little crazy at times, and our psalm for today is no exception. In 119 he repeats over and over again how much he loves the commands of God. I have often found that strange. Here is enjoins the world to rejoice, the whole creation gets in the act, but the kicker is the last line. The cause of all this joy is the judgment of God rendered on that creation. Romans 8 has a great line about how the whole creation groans in eager anticipation of the revealing of the sons of God.

I don't know about you, but I tremble at the thought of appearing before that judge. How can I be joyful? Seward NE, is famous for its Fourth of July celebrations. They used to have a State Trooper pull over someone on the freeway which runs by the town, grab

them, bring them into town and they would become the honored, welcomed guest for the day. I am sure when they saw the trooper's lights in their rearview mirror, this was the last thing they were expecting!

This sermon addresses that natural fear with a simple truth. The judge is Jesus. You might want to have the hearer simply look at the creed which they recite every week, or every day if they follow Luther's suggestion. In creating the world, God established his right to judge. I could say honestly, every time I say the creed, that I believe in God, the Father almighty who made the heavens and earth and will judge all that is therein. But I don't say that. The task of judging the earth and all its inhabitants has been given to Jesus, entrusted to his perforated hands.

That means that when I come before that judgment seat, I am not in some terror of the outcome. The verdict was rendered on a hill outside of Jerusalem long ago when He declared that it was finished. What was finished? The necessary punishment of sins was finished, the debt was paid, the broken creation was restored its proper place in the heart of God. The judge looks down to his own hands and declares that the sentence has already been executed upon his own body. Justice served, mercy is done. The crime of my sins has been taken on the judge's body on Calvary.

In this sense the judgment of God is not so much rendering a judgment on my life and my sins any more. It is really asking whether the sacrifice of Christ on that cross, the deed which Jesus accomplished so long ago was sufficient to restore me to God's favor. I am not really on trial there anymore. It is an evaluation of Christ and his work, and I believe, I know, I trust that it is enough even for a sinner like me. Truly, the bible asserts for us that his blood cleanses the whole world.

The bible speaks of much tumult in the days which surround this judgment. There will be much to fear, frightening things to experience. It doesn't sound like much fun, I have to admit. But I can take one fear off the table for you, I can remove one thing from your list of bugbears and hobgoblins. You do not need to fear this judge or the judgment which he renders. He has already spoken your innocence in baptism and sacrament, in absolution and his love. Rejoice, the judge draws near!

4. When you see these things happen, stand up tall and rejoice, your salvation draws near (Gospel – that the Holy Spirit would recast the bad news of today for the hearer into the good news of what Jesus has come to do with his salvation – he came/comes to fix a broken world!)

This sermon would have the hearer really leave with a measure of hope. It is so easy to get depressed by the news on our TV, but we can see these things as evidence of what Christ has come to save.

Cemeteries normally have the graves facing east. Even death is an occasion to see hope. They face east because they will sit up in their graves and see the rising sun or righteousness – Jesus.