

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13
Luke 21:5-19

“Bad News and Good News”
1st Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
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Stewardship Dedication

The Gospel is bad news before it is good news, Frederick Buechner wrote. Hegel put it this way, “*real wisdom can occur only at eventide.*” The Gospel is bad news before it is good news. That is, we only *really* hear it as good news when we know how much help we need. Life holds good times and bad of course, but when we are aware of the bad news: that we are in danger, we are more frail than we thought, we have known failure and brokenness, we’ve known heart break, and worse – caused it, are separated from God and are sinners who’ve even done things we never thought we would do... there in the shadow side, the human soul discovers the need for God, sees the stone rolled away from every metaphorical tomb these bones of ours are rattling around in, and hears, finally, Good News – God loves, forgives, and pours grace on you.

This morning’s Gospel passage recounts how Jesus told his followers much the same thing – “terrible things are going to happen, but don’t obsess about it. God will take care of you.” The passage describes the end of the world as we know it, and the Temple is a metaphor for that. Remember that it was of huge import to the Jewish people – the symbol of God’s presence with them. And, Luke’s Gospel was probably written after the Temple had been destroyed in 70 AD, so this text would have had double the significance, to early Christians hearing it. But Jesus told them that even the Temple, that great symbol didn’t matter: “*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.*” And he told them that those who followed the Christian life would be hated and betrayed and some would die, “*but not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.*” Bad news and Good News.

Apocalyptic expectation was common in the early church. They expected, indeed Paul taught, that Jesus was going to return any day and bring the end of history. That’s the context for the lesson we read from Thessalonians today, where Paul says,

“Anyone not willing to work should not eat. We hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Do not be weary in doing what is right.”

This passage needs a context, and that was the expectation of Christ’s return. The slackers were the people who said, “Why work up a sweat, when Jesus is coming back. It won’t matter, there’s no point to it.” (We had such a public official, in fairly recent times. Back in the 1980’s, Interior Secretary James Watt questioned why we should bother about the environment, since Jesus was coming back in a very short time to burn up the world, and all the faithful would be raptured anyway.) In Thessalonica, others engaged in all sorts of misbehavior, trying to get in their sensual and sensational experiences before the end of the world. Paul is telling them that they are focused on the wrong thing, they are not focusing on Jesus Christ and a righteous life, and they are a drain on the community. And if nothing else, if you don’t work, you don’t eat. Good news and bad news – the good news is God loves you nonetheless; on the other hand, you’re going to get pretty hungry!

So that's the context – folks who are looking at the world all wrong. Not merely lazy, but rather misguided. I think we have to be careful with this text, because it can be interpreted wrongly. Paul is *not* calling us to be the straw boss of the labor force, here. And while there are some lazy people, you don't always know a person's situation. There may be things that don't show – heart disease that limits how much weight someone can carry, fibromyalgia, depression, or any number of hidden factors that impair someone's functioning. So we need to be careful with this text.

And, our context is in some ways the reverse of the Thessalonians. People are spending more time than ever at work, particularly salaried workers, and more time than ever commuting in traffic (bumper to bumper on 280, I-59, I-65) to get there. But for all our work, are we any more focused on Jesus Christ, a righteous life, or our relationships in the community of faith, than the slackers of Thessalonica? I can imagine Paul saying it differently to us: “Shut your notebooks, turn off the PC, get out of the car, and pay attention.”

The point, though, is that in both of these texts there are people fixated on the future, and some ending of the world. “*Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?*” And of course we still have with us the false messiah's and false teachers Jesus warned about, carefully calculating the end of the world, telling us the time, and twisting current events to represent their imagined prophecy. The TV is replete with those Jesus warns us about:

“Beware that you are not led astray. When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified, these things must take place, but the end will not follow immediately. Nation will rise against nation... there will be earthquakes, famines and plagues, and dreadful signs.”

And he told them that, shoot, before that happens, you're going to be arrested and persecuted anyway. (Thanks. I feel better already; bad news.) “But he said, “*Not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.*” (Good news.)

The people he was talking to wanted to know – when, and what next, and how they would know. If terrible times were coming, they wanted to be ready. I wonder, how much do you want to know? We try to look ahead, and know what the stock market or the housing market will do. That's reasonable, when we're trying to plan and trying to budget. Knowing what the weather is going to do can be helpful, and planning for ordinary circumstances and ordinary emergencies just makes sense.

Those who have had or are having children – do you want to know ahead of time the gender of the baby? Some do, some don't. That's an exciting way of looking ahead and wanting to know. What if you could know you had a gene for a genetic defect that would show up as cancer, Alzheimer's, Lou Gehrig's, or something else? What if you could know before childbirth? That's not speculation anymore, because we *can* know a lot of these things.

But is that even good? It is, because you can take preventive measures, and obtain more frequent screenings, to maintain your health. On the other hand, when such technology became possible, the first thing some insurance companies said was that there should be mandatory testing, so they knew who *not* to cover. Knowing even potential futures raises huge questions in biomedical ethics.

This is related in this way – Jesus’ listeners (and Paul’s readers) were overly-concerned with the end of the world as we know it. But it is also true that a diagnosis of a deadly illness can be the end of life as we know it, for those who experience that.

Jesus ticks off the dangers – earthquakes, famine and plague, in an almost “Lions and Tigers and Bears, Oh My!” sort of a way. These are things we experience in the world today. As well as we experience wars and rumors of wars, and, for some, persecution and betrayal. Those who went through Katrina had an experience of the end of life as they knew it; that life has not returned and may never.

One could obsess about the future, and interpret all manner of dire and dreadful signs, and some do live just that way. But that is not what we are called to. And Jesus told his hearers this – when all these terrible things happen, and worse ones when they happen to you personally, it is not the sign of the end. It is the darkness into which God comes to find you, and keep you safe. The Gospel is bad news before it is good news, but then it is good news.

Paul says, “Don’t weary of doing good. Keep working.” Both these texts offer us what we might call an Interim Ethic – in between the expectations we may have of the future, and the experience we have of today. The interim ethic is to do what you would do and are called to do anyway, do what has honesty and integrity, no matter what may happen and when it does. It is a high level of morality to plant a tree under which you will never sit.

And so today we come and dedicate our pledges, the commitments we make to our stewardship of what God has given us. There is a future we do not know and cannot know, and would we want to know it if it detracted from the adventure of going there? Dire predictions are made by some and grand ones by others. But whatever we think may become of all of us, we are called to continue this good work, and not weary in doing what is right. Others have been here before us, and planted trees under which we get to sit – or rather kept overhead this roof under which we get to sit, sustained this community, built that which we inherit. In fact some of you have built what is here, and will hand it on to others.

How many among us will experience the end of life as they know it, and yet will find in this place, in Christ among us, that the larger tale continues to sustain us, and that not a hair of your head will perish, and that God finds us in the direst of places and rescues us there. Whatever the future holds, God is not going to go away.

Thanks be to God.