

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
October 22, 2017
The Reverend Rick Veit

The End Is Near (Comedy Central)

A priest and pastor from the local parishes are standing by the side of the road holding up a sign that reads, "The End is Near! Turn yourself around now before it's too late!" They planned to hold up the sign to each passing car.

"Leave us along you religious nuts!" yelled the first driver as he sped by. From around the curve they heard screeching tires and a big splash.

Said one clergy to the other, "Do you think we should just put up a sign that says 'Bridge Out' instead?"

Oh, my goodness. God tries to be so clear and practical with us. His messages are usually pretty clear, for better and for worse, as we learned in the scriptures today. Of course, we have to be reading, listening, and following God's ways in order to discern and learn the message that God has for us.

First, we have the Old Testament message from Isaiah, that God is the creator and in charge of everything, light and dark, good and evil. And God is pleased when people are faithful, and God gets really angry when people are not faithful. And this is not just any anger. He said to his anointed leader, Cyrus – Anointed, in Hebrew, means Messiah. God says to the one who will help shepherd and save his people, "I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, I will give the treasures of darkness...so that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel.."

God is basically saying, "Remember, I created it all, good and bad, faithful and unfaithful. I love you, and I forgive you. But if you do and live unfaithfully, I get angry, I can still wipe everything out as I have done in the past...or not. "I form light and create darkness, I make weal, prosperity, and I create woe, disaster; I the LORD do all these things. I am your strength."

As I mentioned last week, we, as Episcopalians, tend to only think of God as this kind and gentle God, one who never gets mad, almost like a nice counselor. Yes, but do not be fooled. Remember, God wiped out everything on the entire earth when Noah and his family were the only ones that proved to be faithful. They were the only survivors. God sent plagues at other times. God wiped out the Egyptian army after their abuse of Israel – drowned the entire bunch in the Red Sea. He sent the plague of the First Born to any Israeli or Egyptian household that was not faithful, who didn't wipe the blood of a sacrificial lamb or goat on their front door. This, of course, was the Passover.

You may be saying, "Yes, but that was the Old Testament God." Okay, Paul's first letter to the people of Thessalonica, as he considered the "end times" (5:3), "While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape."

Our God is an all-powerful God who desires for us to be faithful. When we are not, everything can fall apart around us, even at his hand. In fact, even when we are faithful, everything can fall apart around us, right? Think Job. He was successful at business, had a good marriage and family. He had a strong faith. And virtually everything was taken away from him. But his faith never wavered.

Without God, when challenge occurs, we do not carry the fullness of our strength and wisdom. When we trust in God, God provides and leads us through even the most difficult of life circumstances. We are never hopeless when we choose to follow our LORD. Our life becomes Psalm 96, “Sing to the LORD a new song...Sing to the LORD and bless his Name; proclaim the good news of his salvation from day to day...Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness;”. That is what carries us. And, no, you do not have to be a good singer.

There is the example of the Thessalonians, the people whom Paul was writing too. They were faithful, laboring in love and hope, grounded in the Lord Jesus Christ. Their life was filled with persecution and challenge. Yet they were inspired by the Holy Spirit, and they inspired others. In other words, they did not just receive from God and then keep it to themselves. They shared their knowledge and trust of God with others.

How has your life been going? Have you received from God? How? Do you become self-centered after that, or do you share your story of God, share your life with others?

There is that great quote: “It doesn’t matter how many Sundays you sit in church or if you think you are saved. God sees what you do and how you treat people. That is what really matters.” Anonymous

Have you received from God? Have you been healed? If not, as the great Proverb states (3:5-6), “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.” Then, go and share your gifts from God with others.

This message of trust and hope in an all-powerful God continues in the Gospel, or good news, story today. “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

The Pharisees, or church authorities, had been trying to entrap Jesus by inquiring as to whether it was unlawful to pay taxes or not. Back then, if you didn’t pay taxes, it could be considered treasonous. On the other hand, by supporting the government, you could be considered unfaithful, trusting your allegiance to another god – god with a little ‘g’.

The tax was a census, or head, tax, instituted by the Roman government in about 6 A.D. The census triggered the nationalism that finally became the Zealot movement, which fomented the disastrous war of 66-70 A.D. The Pharisaic church authorities resented the tax, but still paid them. The Herodians supported the Roman tax, and paid them.

Jesus tells the church authorities, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” In other words, you live in the world. Play by the rules. However, trust ultimately in God. Give to God. You are God’s, and you live in a world where God can use you. Follow the laws of the land, but trust in the LORD. The church authorities left him and went away. And God was victorious.

In closing, I wanted to recognize a beautiful piece of work that was done recently. It highlights some ‘wow’ moments at St. Mark’s Church, some faith moments and movements that are in progress at this church. The Bishop inspired all churches in Wyoming to bring a shield to Diocesan Convention. It was held a few weeks ago in Lander. The shield was to be filled with ‘wow’ moments that have or are

occurring in your church. If Jesus were to walk into your congregation, what would He say ‘wow’ about?

Linda McElwain created our shield. It has our music. It includes images of people, representing the family that is St. Mark’s. It includes coffee, representing the fellowship and communal experience here. There is a hand with a heart, representing the love that we share with others both inside and outside of the church. This includes, but is not limited to, our population that is homeless. There is also the African print that represents our continuing relationship with the Diocese of Kiteto in Tanzania. There is a cocoon in the midst of the WOW and multiple butterflies, representing us spreading our wings in Cheyenne and throughout the world. The butterflies represent us growing into who we are supposed to be – a restored community where all people are unified with God and each other in Christ, a community grounded in love, as we follow this all-powerful God.

May we continue in that life of grace and love that Paul referred to, a faithful life where we honing in on the wisdom and direction that God has for each of us, a life grounded in following our Savior Jesus Christ.