

24th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 10.15.20

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Matthew 25:14-30

[Jesus said:] "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

"Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return, I would have received what was my own with interest. So, take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'" (641)

This parable is about the church. Jesus is at the end of his life here. We are with him now in the Temple. It's two days prior to the Passover feast, the text tells us. This means it's two days prior to his arrest, three days prior to his crucifixion. Somehow, he knows this. Somehow, he can feel this, like when you can feel a storm coming. He is as a man about to go on a journey. He is as someone who would have to entrust his property to those who would stay after him, stay and mind his business until his return, whenever that might be—not that anyone else was thinking in those terms. His leaving in the first place would take them by surprise. His *coming* in the first place was shock enough.

This parable is about the church because, as for his property, it amounted to so much according to the story that it couldn't possibly be meant for taking literally. One talent was about fifteen years' wages, so five talents was over a lifetime's wages, something no master would have entrusted to a slave. For this, no one hearing this story would have taken it as in any way realistic. Something else was being invoked here.

The gospel, the good news that, in Jesus, the kingdom of heaven has come near, is the property entrusted to the slaves. The gospel, the good news that this man, Jesus, who was illiterate, unmarried, childless, which is to say of no status whatsoever in this culture (not to mention the criminal he eventually became), was also the anointed one of God; and that in him, who was absolute presence and immediate response and self-sacrificing love, the kingdom of God had come near; and that by him, the world might know the true nature of God who is not a harsh lord seeking his own glory (but at none of his own efforts or work or sacrifice), but is rather a master who would go to tremendous effort (breaking into history that we might know him) and would sacrifice his own self, and would then entrust the likes of us with a great treasure of love and grace and good news for (yes) God's abounding on earth but also for our abounding with life: this is the property with which the likes of us have been entrusted, the property by which we might enter into the joy of our master, and the property whose absence leaves but weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Weeping and gnashing of teeth: it's funny that we often think this is a reference to hell. It's as if we have to imagine something supernatural to really get at weeping and gnashing of teeth. It's as is the world doesn't itself present all sorts of circumstances that seem to amount to but weeping and a gnashing of teeth.

What if the slave who assumed his lord was a harsh man and who didn't bother to do anything with what he'd been entrusted wasn't sent to hell but was sent to the world he himself had created, or at least had believed in, a world in which blessing gets buried and cruelty is assumed?

We kept being told, regarding the Trump administration, that the cruelty was the point. Masha Gessen said as much. Adam Serwer said literally that, in an article in *The Atlantic* entitled "The Cruelty Is the Point." But I was still slow to get it. I was still unbelieving as far as why cruelty would be a first resort for anyone. But, see, I was brought up in the church. I never really met cruelty until high school, prep school, boarding school. Thank God I was a day student; I could go home at night. But, wow, some of those kids were cruel. One of them went on to run Purdue Pharma, which brought us the opioid crisis.

This third slave really believed in cruelty, anticipated it, trolled it out of his master: "I knew you were a harsh man..."

Do you ever wonder what the world might have been like if the church never took hold?

It's true, of course, that the church has been involved in all sorts of human and historical tragedy and sin-soaked machination. Worse, all sorts of evils have been committed in the name of the church or under the auspices of the church. I know this, and I know you know this. What I wonder is whether you ever wonder about what acts of sustaining grace the church has also been a part of, the sort of sustaining grace without which the world would amount to weeping and gnashing of teeth?

The problem is that acts of sustaining grace are more often than not very small things. An act of kindness, an act of generosity, an offering of laughter, a shared hardship that it might feel lighter: these are hard to detect amidst the tides of history. But they just might be the things that make up history.

In college, I took a women's history course. One of the keystone ideas of women's history is that what really makes history, the story of human beings through time, aren't so-called "great men" committing great acts, but are ordinary people doing ordinary things. The pressing questions of such historical narrative construction are what were ordinary people doing, why was that thing ordinary, and why and how did that ordinary thing come to pass out of doing so that some other thing could come to be ordinary?

It's almost never the case that there's a single cause for anything. It's almost always the case that an accumulation of small acts will make up what lasts. The butterfly effect: it will drive you crazy, that all these little happenstances on aggregate make up history.

Chance, or grace? Accident, or providence?

Did you see the two movies from a few years ago about the end of the Second World War, *Dunkirk* and *The Darkest Hour*? The former is about the people's armada, personal and pleasure boats that came out of Britain to cross the channel to Dunkirk, this to rescue a whole regiment trapped by German forces there. The latter is about Winston Churchill taking decisive, and obliterating, action to end the war. Both stories are based on historical fact. I liked *Dunkirk* better, a people's history rather than a "great man" history—because I think it's almost never the case that there's a single cause to anything.

I also liked studying church history in divinity school more than I thought I would. It's about popes, of course, and eventually Protestant troublemakers. The way my professor taught it, though, it was more about people and practices in commonplace parishes.

I wonder what the world would look like if the church had never taken hold.

What do you imagine it would never occur to you to do if you'd never sat with this story washing over you, never let into your imagining so to inform you and transform you—this story of your crucified God. (Who was is that was said to be harsh?)

You know, we are the stories we tell ourselves.

This is Rutger Bregman's whole point in his book, which my mother keeps recommending to me, *Humankind*. According to the blurb on the back: "It's a belief that unites the left and right, psychologists and philosophers, writers and historians. It drives the headlines that surround us and the laws that touch our lives. From Machiavelli to Hobbes, Freud to Dawkins, the roots of this belief have sunk deep into Western thought. Human beings, we're taught, are by nature selfish and governed by self-interest... [But] By thinking the worst of others, we bring out the worst in our politics and economics too. In this major book, ...Rutger Bregman shows how believing in human kindness and altruism can be a new way to think and act as the foundation for achieving true change in our society. It is time for a new view of human nature."

Bregman, as it happens, is the son of a pastor.

He, of course, spent a lot of time rejecting what his father had spent his life preaching. More recently, though, he's come back to some of those stories and suppositions that informed his childhood and his childhood culture. He's admitted in many of the interviews I've listened to, all in heady spaces of high-minded discourse (NPR, WNYC), that this early informing of his mind and imagination has a lot to do with what he now believes people should be told about themselves—about ourselves. We have terrific capacity for good. We have a terrific capacity for both evil and good, and what stories we most frequently tell ourselves might really, really matter as to which capacity grows and which dries up and withers away.

What do you imagine the world would be like if the church had never told its story, had never confessed and professed that God might be merciful at least as much as God is just, that God might be vulnerable at least as much as God is mighty, that God might have seen Himself most manifest in the Crucified One—this one who *blessed* those who'd killed him, and while he died; this one who returned to the world that had killed him, and with this first to say, "Peace be with you"?

What do you imagine *you* would be like if you'd never met people who fuss over such things as the nature of God, the nature of Christ, the nature of the world and we who inhabit it; or over such things as whether communion should be served by a priest at the altar or by some people sent out to the pews; or whether worship spaces should be as sanctuaries from the world—stone and stained glass, or should be missional spaces for preparing and sending people out to the world—windows of clear glass for clearly considering the world; or whether the church should attend to its own, a folding in and holding firm by which the appeal is played out ("Join this body and be held in care and lovingkindness."), or whether the church should go out to give succor to those suffering, feeding the hungry, fighting for justice, securing shelter for the homeless, living out love.

What things do you do on the regular that are filled with such a world-transforming spirit?

Of course, it might be easy to believe none of these things really matter, none of these really amount to much when you consider what we're up against. And I suppose it doesn't help that most of what comes to us as Scripture comes from times of world historic crisis—like when Paul was writing this letter to the Thessalonians.

This is thought to be his earliest letter, at least of the ones we know about. But all of his letters, indeed all of the New Testament, comes to us from one of those times, the end of an age.

It's an occurrence that happens every few centuries, every half a millennium or so. The age comes to an end, and eventually another begins, but for a time there is a terrible in-between, spanning years, decades.

The first century of the Common Era can be thought of as such a time in between. The coming of Jesus into the world; the disruption this came to be among the Jews, and the way it exacerbated Rome's arbitrary hatred for all Judea; the felling of the Temple, this which had stood as central for 500 years; the destruction of the city, which was ancient and prized; and the sixty-year Jewish-Roman war, which reduced the Jewish population around the Mediterranean from an established near-majority to a persecuted and scattered minority: all worked to make this an in-between time, when the old had fallen away but the new had not yet arrived.

See, it was no mere metaphor, Paul writing, "When they say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!"

Funny how something that sounds so scary is felt as the Day of the Lord.

Or maybe not—for what joy those terrible labor pains of pregnancy can bring! The Day of the Lord: when the old has fallen away, and the new hasn't yet arrived, and all there is, is the powerful, the mysterious, the beyond-controlling laboring forth; when the disruption that brings about some great downfall at last occurs, but the new hasn't yet take root, and all there is are the seeds of life as when God first planted his storied garden.

I sometimes wonder whether we're amidst such an in-between time. The pandemic is just the latest cause for my wondering this, but it's hardly the first, and I'm hardly alone. Lots of people, from political philosophers to fiction writers to climate scientists to pop culture makers, have played with the idea that we're at the end of the age.

It's the sort of thing that has filled me with dread from time to time.

It has, more lately, filled me with incredible hope, even anticipation—as if we're at the advent of something mysterious and compelling and ripe with possibility, something perhaps more true than we've long known anything to be.

It's also made me pity the poor church-goers who sat in sturdy pews in well-established churches amidst a cultural hegemony that, we see now, came close to boring itself to death.

Or maybe did. But you know what God does with death.

So, alive, but in barest state, we don't have the luxury of boring ourselves to death now. We, the church, has work to do. We've been given these seeds, these call them talents, this story of a crucified God. He ever returns to us alive, to live again. And he needs us.

He needs *us*.

Thanks be to God.