

Pentecost 26C (11/13/2016)

Malachi 4:1-2a

Psalm 98

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19

In times of trial, Christ promises us words and a wisdom to sustain us, and in order that we might testify to him by our own words and actions. But Jesus' words will find no room in our hearts if they are already filled with fear, bitterness, or despair.

Preaching is a profound privilege. I have the honor of standing up in front of you week after week and trying to speak a word of faith, a word of hope, a word of love into the heart of our complex life together. But, I admit that at times preaching also feels like a fool's errand. How small my words seem in comparison to your loss and grief; how empty my reserve of wisdom in the face of my own darkness; how insignificant my preaching amid such an excess of other, louder messages. There are weeks when I'm just not sure that I have much to offer in the way of words.

I spent probably far too much time this week scrolling through Facebook in the wake of a very contentious election, epitomized by the race for president. The outcome was perhaps a surprise, but what was not surprising was the outpouring of words in response to it. Words of bitterness, words of misunderstanding, words of hate, words of fear. I'm careful not to dictate to others how they should feel about the result of this election. I'm also aware that my identity – my race, my gender, my sexuality, my religion – grants me the privilege of a certain distance from the potential consequences. Nevertheless, I'm struck by the deep, wounding significance of a nation rising up against itself. If I'm reading our words correctly, we're not sure

what common ground, if any, remains between Americans with vastly different perceptions of reality and vastly different priorities for our nation's life.

As if I weren't already immersed in enough words, I keep a word-of-the-day calendar in my office. This past Wednesday, the day after the election, the word of the day was – I kid you not – *anathematize*, a verb meaning to “curse” or “denounce.” *Anathematize*. How often does this word capture the way we use our other words, and the way those words settle into our hearts? Certainly, in the aftermath of an election with such high stakes, we are aware of the power of our words to anathematize, to curse, to denounce those whom we do not understand. **Large-scale political conflict has a way of awakening our basest instincts, the urge to dominate or destroy or at least disgrace our perceived enemies. And, crises in general have a way of inciting fear and wild speculation.**

“Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom,” Jesus acknowledges in our Gospel today, “there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; there will be dreadful portents and signs from heaven.” Of course, every era suffers its own wars and disasters, and every generation witnesses its fair share of blood moons and meteor showers, so Jesus' apocalyptic imagery does not constitute a precise plan for the end of time.¹ In fact, he warns against false prophets who sway frightened people by their apocalyptic pronouncements: “many will come in my name and say ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them.” So, Jesus insists that **God's schedule for the fullness of time is simply not for us to grasp.**

¹ See Gilberto Ruiz, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3059.

But if conflict and crisis are not signs of the end, then what is the purpose of Jesus' alarming vision? "These things must take place first," he clarifies, "but the end will not follow immediately." In other words, **life on Earth is filled with trials and tribulations, but we don't get to skip the hard stuff; we have to sit with brokenness and suffering, at least for now.** The question remains: *How are we to live faithfully in the interim?*

"Do not be terrified." It's not surprising that this refrain, so common throughout Holy Scripture, finds its way into the heart of Jesus' disturbing statement about discord and suffering. Although many of us are privileged enough not to endure persecution on account of our faith or suffer the worst consequences of violence, hardship, or disease, Jesus recognizes the very real reasons for fear. **Conflict and crisis always have victims – usually the most vulnerable among us – who are reasonably afraid for their safety and their dignity. And others among us may fear for the health of our loved ones and our communities, the state of international affairs, or the well-being of creation.**

Jesus does not say, "Do not be troubled" or "Be numb to it all." Instead, he says, "Do not be terrified." But why? His encouragement in the face of trouble is not unsubstantiated, but is accompanied by a promise: "I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict." *Words and wisdom.* **Through the Babel of competing words – words of confusion or condescension or hate or fear – another word emerges: God's word of hope to**

a groaning creation,² the word that became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth.³ And, Jesus' words and wisdom are fundamentally creative, overcoming the barriers we erect, and inviting us into a better life together – a life marked by greater trust in God and greater love for the other.⁴

Dear church, are we capable of hearing him? Those other words abound – the words of pundits and talking heads, the words of family and friends, anonymous words spray-painted on walls, the words of our own misgivings and mistrust. **In times of trial, Christ promises us words and a wisdom to sustain us, and in order that we might testify to him by our own words and actions. But Jesus' words will find no room in our hearts if they are already filled with fear, bitterness, or despair. Certainly, his words fell on hard hearts the first time around, and his life was swept away by the very hostility from which he sought to rescue us. But Jesus' resurrection corroborates his promise to be with us always in words and wisdom to the end of the age.⁵**

The task of faith is to quiet all the noise – both the noise around us and the noise inside us – and listen for the promised words. “Blessed are you who weep....” “...the least among all of you is the greatest.” “Love your enemies....” “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.” “...the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” “...it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” “...even the hairs of your head are all counted.” “Do not be afraid.” “Go in peace.”⁶

² Romans 8:22.

³ John 1:14.

⁴ See Mark 12:29-31.

⁵ Matthew 28:20. See also Luke 21:33.

⁶ Various statements from Luke.