

Is. 65:17-25

Canticle 9

II Thess. 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19

Proper 28

St. Barnabas

The lessons for today, two Sundays before Advent, lead to the close of the Christian calendar. So, fittingly, they speak of the end of time. God, Isaiah tells us, proclaims that the former things are passing away, to be replaced by a new heaven and a new earth where pain and destruction shall not be remembered or even come to mind. Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, describes the Last Judgement and the coming of the Lord and exhorts us to be missionaries. By imitating Paul's missionary conduct, he says, we will be imitating Christ, not just witnessing but revealing God's new world. And the author of Luke follows both with a vivid portrayal of that end time.

As I read them, I remembered a conversation about the lessons appointed for this day. Standing at the back of the nave several years ago, waiting for the processional to begin, the lay reader said to me, "I cannot find one redeeming feature in this gospel! It is nothing but doom and gloom!" And she shook her head with wry humor.

"Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes...famines and plagues...they will arrest you and persecute you...you will be betrayed and hated..." Indeed, these lessons, like this season of the year, remind us that things come to an end. The harvest is in, the cold commences, things that were once alive are either dead now or dormant. But hard though all that may be to accept, we are still bound to assert that all these events are good news. They are good news because they proclaim that the destruction of the familiar signifies the beginning of everlasting possibilities. Isaiah proclaims and Jesus promises that the living word of God is near, that the living word of God will come to us anew, even in the hour of ending. But how can we hold on to the conviction of good news in the face of predicted disaster?

This passage in the gospel according to Luke is very complicated and one of the most difficult parts of the gospel tradition to interpret. In fact, scholars continue to disagree on its genre, the stages of its composition, even its emphases.

Just one example: Here are almost word-for-word parallel passages in both Mark, Matthew, and Luke, and, as any student of the Bible will tell us, it is important to our understanding to compare similarities and differences. Unlike Mark and Matthew, Luke offers no birth pangs but seems to make the end time coincide with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, eliminating the contrast between the end and a new beginning. But the three parallel passages have in common at a key moment the word "testimony," the word in Greek from which martyrdom is derived.

The term *martyria* is variously translated "witness or testimony," as if these two words were interchangeable. But in his study of Isaiah, scholar Stephen Cook notes that only God gives testimony and that *martyria* is a technical term for official commands of God. [1] So when the gospel writers say we are to stand before governors and kings for Jesus' sake to bear testimony before them, they are telling us that in giving testimony we will not just be witnessing. We will be revealing God's own

purposes, God's longing and God's delight. Yet Luke alone adds this final sentence: "By your endurance you will gain your souls."

Some translations of this sentence read, "Your endurance will win you your lives." [2] Others translate "By standing firm you will win true life for yourselves." [3] The beloved King James Version reads "In your patience possess ye your souls." So is it lives or souls? Is there a difference between lives and souls? Or is there a better distinction, a distinction between the life of the body, the life of the spirit, and the life of the soul.

It is fairly easy to see that the life of the body and the life of the spirit can be distinguished. After all, Christians believe in the resurrection of the body, as we profess in the creeds. But too often we muddle the separation of the life of the Spirit from the life of the soul. The life of the Spirit is a principal bestowed on humankind by God. But Christians do not believe in the immortality of the soul apart from the body. The immortality of the soul is an idea developed in the writings of Plato. The soul is the breath of life constituted in the individual. So when Luke writes, "By your endurance you will gain your souls," he is talking about the seat of new life produced in the inward human by good character, faith, fidelity, and perseverance that is protected by persistent endurance coming to maturity, the authentic self.

T.S. Eliot denies the possibility of a life of the soul, an authentic self, in his poem "The Hollow Men." Eliot's prediction of the end of time for this era is not earthquake, famine, pestilence, great terrors and signs from heaven. No, his vision of the end of our time is of emptiness and lack of meaning. He writes,

"We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats' feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar
Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralyzed force, gesture without motion;"

Drawing on Dante, he continues:

“Those who have crossed
With direct eyes, to death’s other Kingdom
Remember us---if at all---not as lost
Volent souls, but only
As the hollow men
The stuffed men.”

The poem concludes, “This is the way the world ends. Not with a bang but a whimper.”

In contrast to Eliot’s end with no new beginning, you and I know there are other, everlasting possibilities.

Events of this week have caused many parishioners of St. Barnabas to think of the testimony of souls whose endurance has been an example to all of us. Sunday and Monday we honored the sacrifices of men and women of the armed forces. Then yesterday we buried Ann Gowen Combs. Reflecting on the juxtaposition of Veteran’s Day and Ann’s memorial, I was moved to reread the memoirs of Vincent Gowen, this parish’s first priest, who as a missionary in the Philippines was interred with his family as a prisoner of war during World War II. One episode demonstrates Vincent’s thoughtful relationship with the native Igorots he was serving. Quote: “For several days I had been absent in Manila. When I returned, I chanced to notice that a gold pocket-watch was missing from my desk. It had hung suspended from the tusk of a bronzed elephant.

A brief investigation would soon have discovered the culprit. I preferred to stay ignorant. Consulting the Igorot principal, a man with whom I had been privileged to work for at least a dozen years with never a whisper of misunderstanding, I explained the situation: the watch, I was certain had been taken on impulse. Could he contrive its return in such a manner as to make it appear that the watch had never been stolen?

Not more than a day later, my small daughter [Ann] came, voicing a reproachful tale, to her mother. Her doll, Heidi, was the thief. She had found the lost watch in Heidi’s lap! Naughty Heidi!

Heidi was a solemn-faced rag doll, best beloved of a whole array whom Ann kept on a long seat in her bedroom. Since this seat was exactly under a window that looked down into the school, a window usually propped open, it was no feat for a boy to climb up the exposed framework of the walls and drop the watch in Heidi’s lap.

Heidi never repeated her one misdeed. She lived through years of concentration camp and, like her small mistress, had to be fumigated with DDT by our Army rescuers to depopulate her of bedbugs. She was brought home, dirty and disheveled, to an honourable retirement. If we blamed her unfairly, it was in a good cause.”[4] End quote.

As war became imminent, Vincent and others had asked that wives and children be sent home while there was still time. But the State Department feared the damage a mass flight from the Philippines would do to Filipino morale: "It might panic the islands into surrender. To preserve the fiction of Philippine security American women and children, when evacuated from China and Japan, were sent to Manila instead of to the United States. Total warfare was given a new slant. Civilians were planted unsuspectingly in a danger zone to support political strategy." [5]

When orders came for all the Americans to be interred, they walked over 20 miles of mountains to prison camp. Only one of the bewildered prisoners refused to be despondent, wrote Vincent. "This was our [6 year-old] daughter Ann. The [Igorot] women had made her a doll, a rag doll which they had been unable to send on her birthday, some weeks earlier. Holding up her new gift by its limp arms, she exclaimed, "Hasn't this been a happy day!" [6]

After three long years near starvation, the Gowen family came home to Bainbridge Island. There had been one Commandant in charge of the prison camp, Rokuro Tomibe, who had tried to prevent torture of the internees and was removed. So great was the prisoners' respect for Mr. Tomibe that when he departed, the Camp lined up to cheer him. In 1977 Tomibe was invited to a reunion of internees in San Francisco, a reunion Vincent Gowen attended. When Gowen returned from that reunion he preached a sermon from this pulpit testifying to the new life found in reconciliation, testifying to the endurance of the soul of humankind.

At the offertory the choir sang, "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord; He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored...." And you know the rest of the Battle Hymn of the Republic. By the time the choir reached the final chorus, the entire congregation was standing with tears in their eyes singing "Glory! Glory, hallelujah While God is marching on."

You and I are left to apply the disparate parts of this morning's readings to our lives, and so we shall; for it wouldn't be HOLY scripture if it weren't applicable to our lives today. Daily as we hear of wars and insurrections, nation rising against nation, kingdom against kingdom, distress gives us an opportunity to testify. For we are missionaries, destined to be the living word of God; and by our endurance we shall gain our souls.

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[1] Stephen L. Cook, *Conversations with Scripture: 2 Isaiah* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2008), 26.

[2] Jerusalem Bible

[3] New English Bible

[4] Vincent H. Gowen, *Sunrise to Sunrise*, pp. 203-204.

[5] Gowen, p. 227.

[6] Gowen, p. 254.