Sermon 2016.11.13

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Glendive, MT

Malachi 4:1-2a, Psalm 98, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13, Luke 21:5-19

 For the past few weeks I’ve been thinking about this sermon. What is a preacher to say the Sunday after a big election? And what am I to say when I know that part of the congregation voted one way on the political divide and that part voted the other?

 Before the results came in, before any actual polling places opened – since before I received my ballot in the mail – I’ve been thinking about how to preach today. Before the results trickled in, I knew this would be hard, no matter who won.

 And then, a couple of weeks ago, I looked at the Bible readings for today. There are times when our schedule of readings serves up a down-the-middle pitch, a set of quarter notes in an easy-to-play ascending pattern. There are those weeks. Then there are the weeks that the Scripture passage seems more like a 100 mile-per-hour curveball that’s also a slider and a knuckleball, or a series of eighth notes and triplets and dotted eighth notes that seems to jump from here to there and back again.

 This week, when I first read the passages, is the hard week.

 We hear from the prophet Malachi that the day will come when all evildoers will be like stubble in the field that gets burned up, without mercy. That’s a hard thing to hear, and I really don’t have a good spin I can put on it.

 We hear from Psalm 98, that says that “All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.” And I have to think to myself, that’s just not true yet. There are places that have not seen the victory of God, are not experiencing peace, do not find freedom nor hope. I think about my friend Timothee, who is a pastor in Cameroon in central Africa. He is working with refugees from the Central African Republic…there are more than 250,000 refugees from the Central African Republic who now live in Cameroon because their country isn’t safe.

I think of a man I met in a hotel in Kenya, who is from South Sudan, whose country has been in civil war and armed struggle for years. Just this week the UN special advisor for genocide warned that South Sudan may soon experience genocide.

When I hear this passage from Psalm 98, I think of the hundreds of thousands of people in Mosul and Aleppo who simply want to live freely, who want their children to go to school, who want to grow old in peace.

And I think of our own country, where half the people don’t think we’ve found God’s victory because of the election results, and the other half who may think we’re on our way. “All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.” It sounds a little strange with all that in mind.

We hear in 2 Thessalonians that “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.” This sounds harsh, and actually sounds counter to a lot of Christian principles today – that we should help those in need and feed and clothe them as we can.

But there is a lot behind this passage. 2 Thessalonians was probably written between 50-60 AD…within a few decades of Jesus’ death and resurrection. And the people at the time thought Jesus was coming back imminently – like before their own deaths. So they weren’t working, just hanging out idly waiting for Jesus to come back.

But that’s not the kind of Christian life we are to live. We aren’t supposed to be lazy because Jesus is coming back some day, nor lazy because we have ultimate hope that God’s got everything under control. We’re supposed to do things, be active…and that leads us into the reading from Luke.

Jesus is standing in front of the temple in Jerusalem, the most holy place in Judaism, and he says the temple will be torn apart. There will be earthquakes, famines, plagues, wars, persecutions, and other terrible things.

I’m not saying either side was right in any of our elections. But I will say this. Jesus’ words here are 2000 years old, and I believe they are true literally – that there will be earthquakes and famines and whatnot before Jesus comes back.

But I also believe they speak deeper than their literal nature. The earth has been shaking under our feet lately in this country in many ways. There are famines here of caring, of acceptance, of mutuality. There is a plague of fear that has been allowed to run rampant, unchecked by vaccines that either side has tried to produce. And that plague of fear has even been helped by both sides – Republicans and Democrats.

At the beginning of this sermon, I said that these texts seemed very difficult at first. But after weeks of pondering, I realized the point – I realized why God sent these texts to a preacher on the Sunday after the election.

Jesus says that all this will occur…and he says, “This will give you an opportunity to testify.”

It’s taken Jesus a lot longer to come back than Christians originally thought. And it has given us the opportunity to testify to more and more people.

There have been physical earthquakes and famines and plagues and wars. And they have given us the chance to tell others about a loving God who breaks through these things, who gives hope in the midst of despair.

There are emotional famines in our country – places that only know the fear that they hear from their leaders.

There are psychological earthquakes as people try to sort out the past and the future, things they didn’t expect or anticipate.

There are plagues in our midst – things that hurt relationships across regions and states and cities and neighborhoods.

And all of these give us the opportunity to testify. Not testify to the candidate that we think is our savior – but testify to our actual Savior. Humans fail. We do. And past presidents and future presidents of any party have faults. They cannot save us all. They cannot make everything right, they cannot create hope for everyone.

Our testimony is of something greater than a president, than an agenda, than a vision. Our testimony is of a God that saves, a God who created and then came back because we’d messed the creation up. It’s of a God who cared enough to die, who in dying gives us hope because God couldn’t stay dead. Our hope and testimony are of a God who still lives, and whose kingdom and power and glory shine brightly in and through our lives.

How we are believers in this time matters a great deal. If your candidates lost, this is not the time to spread fear and misunderstanding. It’s the time to have courage and to speak about the greatness of God and God’s care for each of us. If your candidates won, this is not the time to plug your ears and do whatever you want without care for your neighbor. It’s the time to be humble, to reach out to the other side and share with them the love that God has for them.

Whatever has happened in the past few years, and whatever will happen in the next few years, this is not a time to be idle. This is a time to testify. Because there are still places in this world that have yet to see God’s victory. Some of them are thousands of miles away. Some of them are just a few feet. Tell God’s story to them.

And now, may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.