

Proper 28 C 2010

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

It was the eve of some great battle –  
I cannot possibly remember which one.

In my classroom  
some great hero contemplated his doom,  
Certain that the morning, when it came  
would be his last.  
Perhaps a great portent in the sky  
Heralded the end;  
Maybe a long-awaited prophecy  
Was coming to fulfillment.

Outside, it was a spring morning.  
All the crabapples were in bloom.  
Students already on their way to lunch  
Wandered past the window,  
Waving to my students still trapped inside.

Trapped inside, with dreadful portents  
and great signs from heaven  
and the eternal questions.

When did two worlds ever collide like this? I wondered.  
What can the hero who faces his doom  
Have to say to these immortal students,  
Gazing out the window  
At the world's most beautiful day?

Suddenly, one of them looked up from his book  
And asked,  
"What would you do if you knew you were going to die tomorrow?  
What would you do if you knew you were going to die  
In an hour?"

It started out as a serious question,  
But then he gave me an impish grin.  
Still, for a moment,  
The question had been a real one.

What do we do,  
When we know the end is near?

There are personal answers  
To this question, of course.  
Some of us are brought face to face with the question,  
And must live the answer day by day,  
Or hour by hour.

Others of us wonder about it,  
Maybe as an idle question,  
Maybe with great seriousness.  
And there are as many answers  
As there are people who have faced the question,  
In theory or in reality.

For each of us as individuals,  
For all of us in our lives with friends and family,  
It's a very real question.  
We think about our own end.  
But what about the end of the world?  
The day of judgment,  
Foretold so often,  
In so much of scripture?

In community,  
At least in a community like ours,  
The question doesn't mean much anymore.  
We see nation rise up against nation,  
We see earthquakes,  
And famines, and plagues.  
Over and over and over.

But are they signs of the end for us?  
Are we fooled into thinking that Jesus is near?

We think in terms of causes, and solutions,  
Justice, and relief.  
At least in a community like this,  
There is little talk of judgment day.

It was different for the early church.  
They saw signs of the end  
Everywhere they looked.  
The sky was always falling,  
Or threatening to fall,  
And that disaster was the beginning  
Of a new heaven and a new earth.

Can we possibly feel their urgency?  
They believed that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead  
Was the beginning of a new age,  
And that the world as we know it  
Would be gathered up,  
Right away,  
Into the transformed life God promised  
And showed forth.

What they believed is true –  
And it hasn't happened yet.  
What they believed is true –  
And it has been so long in coming  
That even the worlds we use to describe it  
No longer have meaning

For the people who long to hear them.

It's true.  
The time is not yet here.  
Even by the time Paul wrote his letter  
To the church in Thessalonica,  
It was becoming clear  
That the time was not yet here.

It's in this context  
That we need to hear his words  
About working and eating.  
These words have nothing to do  
With entitlement programs  
Or charity.  
They have everything to do with the question –

What would you do  
If you knew you were going to die tomorrow?  
What would you do  
If you knew the world was going to end tomorrow?

There are lots of possible answers,  
But for some of the new Christians in Thessalonica,  
The answer was the same  
As it would be for some of us.  
Run a bath,  
Get a box of bonbons,  
And pick up a mystery.  
Gaudy Night, anyone?

But, as it turned out,  
the bathwater got cold,  
And the chocolates were all gone,  
And the mystery solved,  
And still Jesus did not come back,  
And the world failed to come to an end.

And by the time the writer of Luke's gospel  
Was telling the story in one Christian community,  
It was clear  
That we were in it for the long haul.

What would you do  
If you had thought you were going to die,  
If you thought the world was coming to an end,  
And then you woke up,  
And the sun came up again  
And the seasons came one after another,  
And suddenly,  
It was fall turning to winter,  
Two thousand years later,  
And the time was still not yet?

That would be the time,

I suppose,  
For those of us who are able to work,  
To get back to work.

Those first Christians lived in a world  
Filled not only with dreadful portents,  
But a world where very few understood  
The power of the gospel to give them life.

In the face of danger and lack of understanding  
They found words to tell the story,  
Words and a wisdom given by the spirit of truth.

Now we live in a world of earthquake  
And famine and plague,  
A world of foreclosure  
And debts and deficits  
And again, it is a world where  
Very few understand  
The power of the story we have to tell.

How do we tell the good news now  
in plain language?

God will give us words and a wisdom.

Those first Christians faced persecution.  
Perhaps our greater challenge is indifference.

But we have a compelling story to tell –  
A story that could change the world  
And bring it to a new beginning.

Today, I might tell the story this way:  
There is a good,  
That wills our good,  
A good that suffuses all life with radiance,  
A good that makes love spring up  
Without reason  
And endure, and renew itself  
In every generation.

That good can be known,  
And recognized,  
And embraced,  
In a single human being,  
A man named Jesus  
Who lived a long time ago  
And was killed  
And now is alive.  
Death had no power over him,  
Because he was made of love,  
And love is stronger than death.

I cannot tell you why this mystery is true.

My experience,  
And the experience of people I trust,  
Is that this is true.

I can see the power of it in your lives.  
I can see it creating hope in weary hearts.  
I can see it bringing peace to troubled minds.

This mystery of new life is already true.  
No portents in the sky can bring it closer  
Or make it fade away.

Someday the sky will fall.  
It may happen  
In that far distant time  
That scientists predict.  
It might just happen  
Sooner, as the prophets of doom will tell us.  
There is no way to know,  
At least that I know of.

But until the sky falls,  
We have a choice.  
Shall we sit in the bathtub eating chocolates,  
Like the Thessalonians?

Shall we keep on working, like Paul  
And the writer of Luke's gospel  
And the saints who have gone before us  
And invite us to work and wait with them?

Shall we gather at the table,  
And share the gifts of God?  
Shall we read, mark, learn,  
And inwardly digest the scriptures  
That hold the promise?

What would you do,  
If you found out you were not going to die tomorrow,  
But live for two thousand years?

If we had known we were going to live so long,  
The church might say,  
We would have taken better care of ourselves.  
Kind of like Keith Richards.

If we had known the world was going to live so long,  
Maybe we would have taken better care of it.

But here's the gospel truth:  
It's never too late.

It turns out we're still here,  
There's work to do,  
And the time is now.