

“Almost Home”

“Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:28).

There comes a point in every family vacation when the excitement of the trip wears off, when the monotony of the road becomes unbearable, when you are sick and tired of travelling and you just want to be home. At times like this, nerves become frayed, tempers grow short, and the person sitting next to you begins to drive you crazy. Maybe you can remember drawing an imaginary line down the middle of the back seat and threatening your brother or sister with violence if they crossed it. Or maybe you’ve been the parent in the front seat trying to mediate a peace and desperately pleading with your kids by saying, “Just hang on...we’re almost home!”

“We’re almost home!” In many ways, these words summarize today’s readings. We are down to the last two weeks in the church year and, as our culture begins to turn its attention to things like Christmas shopping and family gatherings, the church shifts its focus to the last things. Today’s readings reflect that shift as we hear stern and solemn language about the end of world, the return of Christ, and the judgment of all mankind.

In Malachi, the prophet delivers ominous words about Judgment Day when he writes, “For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven” (Malachi 4:1). In the gospel reading from Luke, Jesus warns, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven” (Luke 21:10-11). So much for holiday cheer!

These readings are filled with prophecies and, to be fair, these threatening predictions cover a wide range of events. In addition to the words that deal with Judgment Day, in this section of Luke, Jesus also describes the destruction of the Jerusalem temple (Luke 21:5-6); and in verses 12-19, He tells the apostles about the persecution they will face as leaders of the early church; and, in verses 20-24, Jesus informs them that Jerusalem itself will fall to the Gentiles, a prophecy that came true in 70 A.D. when Roman armies completely destroyed the holy city. But whether He is talking about the end of the world, the Roman occupation of Israel, or the destruction of the temple, all of the words that Jesus speaks in this reading carry with them an unmistakable tone of urgency. And please understand that as much as these frightening words applies to the disciples who gathered to hear Jesus speak in Jerusalem, they are also meant for us.

Christ is coming back, the end is near, the things of this life are temporary, and the world in which we live will soon be gone. Judgment Day is coming! These are things about which the Bible is very clear and these teachings from Jesus are a terrifying reminder of the consequences of sin. About this impending doom, Malachi wrote, “all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze” (Malachi 4:1). And this ominous word of warning should shake us to the core, because the truth behind this prophetic word is that God will judge sin. And there will be a day of justice. And the troubles of this life, and the things that we have personally done to make them worse are more than enough to separate us from a holy and just God.

Yet, as much as we deserve the Judgment that these readings describe, that is not what God wants for us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer expresses this fact of divine mercy when he writes, “God does not want people to be afraid. Not even in view of the Last Judgment. But God has given human beings (His Word) so that they might know what their life is and what it means. God lets us know this already in the present so that we may live our lives in sincerity and in the light of the Last Judgment. God lets us know this only in order that we human beings might find our way to Jesus Christ, that we turn from our own evil way and seek to encounter him.”

Bonhoeffer continues, “Christ *judges*. This is an absolutely serious matter. But (remember,) *Christ* judges, which also must mean, after all, that the Merciful One judges, the one who has lived among (tax collectors) and sinners, the one who was tempted just as we are, the one who in his own body has suffered our pain, our anxiety, our desires, the one who knows us and calls us by our name. Christ judges; this means grace is the judge, and forgiveness and love – those who bind themselves to these things are already acquitted. Those who appeal to their own works Christ will judge and condemn according to these works. But we are to rejoice about that day; we are not to worry and tremble but joyfully place ourselves in his hands... Loving the Last Judgment”¹

Repentance. That’s what this reading is about. And this detail is so important for us to recognize because, you see, a repentant heart is a heart ready for judgment. A repentant heart is a heart that is honest about its sin and acknowledges its need. A repentant heart is a heart that turns from its own feeble and flawed efforts and clings alone to the promises of God who took on our flesh, who suffered our punishment, who died in our place, and a repentant heart trusts in God’s promise – even when the journey is hard; even when the road seems unbearable. And to the repentant heart, today God says, “But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall” (Malachi 4:2). And to the repentant heart, today Jesus says, “You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish” (Luke 21:17-18). *This* is what God promises to the repentant heart and, in these Words of promise, the repentant heart rejoices and is ready for the end – loving the last judgment!

Even for the believer, there are times when this journey becomes unbearable, when we are burdened by sin and its results in our lives, and when the devil would tempt us look to the end with fear. And at these desperate times in our lives, when the heart is broken and there are no words left to speak, God breaks through the darkness and speaks with shocking clarity and, for the sake of His Son, He says, “Do not be terrified...(instead) straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:9, 28). My friends, in the life and love of Christ Jesus you can hang on in faith, because you are almost home. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

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¹ Bonhoeffer, Dieterich. Reflections on the Bible: Human Word and Word of God. Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. 2004. 53ff.