



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, November 15, 2020
The Twenty-fourth Sunday After Pentecost

Solemn Eucharist

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Adam Spencer, *Associate for Pastoral Care*
on
Zephaniah 1:7-18 and Matthew 25:14-30
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That Time of the Year

It happens like clockwork.

Like the dawn chorus of birds singing their hearts out in the mornings in springtime. Like the leaves changing color and drifting down to the ground in the fall. Like the sunset at the end of each and every day.

Around this time of the year, sometime between September and November, every single year, we in the church ask you for your money. You can set your watch by it. You can see it coming a mile off.

The Rector gets up in the pulpit and preaches a sermon about giving. Members of the congregation may give testimonials about why they love this parish and why they support it with their dollars. You will receive or maybe have already received special emails and full-color brochures in the post about all of the wonderful ministry happening here at Saint Thomas. You might get a phone call or a letter asking you to make a pledge or to please increase your pledge this year, if you can.

Call it stewardship season. Or, the every member canvass. Or the annual appeal. Whatever you call it. It's here. It's that time of the year again.

It's also that time of the year when the days visibly shorten. When the nights seem to start earlier and earlier. When the thermometer drops and the cold wind brings with it ice and snow. And it is that time of the year when the church's lectionary takes a turn towards the apocalyptic.

Advent is coming. If you can believe it we're only a couple of weeks away now from the end of one liturgical year and the beginning of another. And Advent is about more than simply the countdown to Christmas. Advent commemorates what Saint Bernard of Clairvaux called the THREE comings of Christ. The first coming of Jesus in the incarnation, the nativity, yes Christmas. But also, secondly, that daily coming of Christ into our hearts and our lives. The incarnate God here in our midst in our everyday lives. And thirdly and finally the last coming of Christ - at the end of the age. To set all things right. To establish the kingdom of God once and for all. And to issue judgement on all that has come before. On you and on me.

And so in the coming few weeks we will continue to be presented with readings like today's reading from Zephaniah. Listen again to the prophet's words:

“Be silent before the Lord God! For the day of the Lord is at hand...On that day I will punish all who leap over the threshold, who fill their master’s house with violence and fraud...On that day, says the Lord, a cry will be heard from the Fish Gate, a wail from the Second Quarter, a loud crash from the hills... At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, “The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm.”...The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter, the warrior cries aloud there. That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements. I will bring such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind; because they have sinned against the Lord, their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung. Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the Lord’s wrath; in the fire of his passion the whole earth shall be consumed; for a full, a terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.”

Man. Now that’s a Stewardship sermon.

The prophet Zephaniah is concerned here, like his fellow Old Testament prophets, with the conduct of the people of God and how it has gone astray. In so many of the prophets, one particular concern is the worship of other gods. The prophets are concerned also with conduct related to the treatment of other people - mistreating the poor, fostering injustice and oppression. Whatever the particular issue at hand in each instance of prophecy, the Biblical prophets proclaim a reckoning on human behavior. A judgement from God on our human lives.

Prophecy isn’t just about fear and doom though. Prophecy is, ultimately, about the idea that our human lives matter. Our actions matter. We are accountable, in the final tally, for how we choose to spend our days and our lives.

Our Gospel reading today is a well-beloved church fundraising text. The parable of the talents. The master going on a journey summons his servants and entrusts to each of them some of his money. When he gets back, he asks them how it turned out. Two of them took the money and made more money. One of them hid the money and nothing came of it. And you know how that preaches: We too, therefore, are called to use the gifts that God has given us abundantly. To put all we are given to good use for God’s purposes. We, like those servants, are called to be good stewards of the bounty that God has given us.

We know this story. We’ve heard it. We nod our heads and figure out the “moral” of the story about halfway through. But the ending of this familiar parable, this parable that we can probably recite in our sleep, the ending smacks of Zephaniah. Of the menacing dark, winter clouds of Advent apocalyptic. The servant who hid the money away: He’s called worthless by the Master and is cast “into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Now, I’m not so much a big fire and brimstone guy. I’m not into scaring or guiltning people from up here. But I find myself rather liking the hard edge at the end of that parable. Just as I find myself drawn to the apocalyptic preaching of the prophets, to the frightful scenes in the Book of Revelation. Not because I’m a spiritual masochist or because I believe we’re sinners in the hands of an angry God. But because these difficult texts that we read every week aren’t just nice little religious stories. They have shocking and challenging parts. They have stakes.

“Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?” Poet Mary Oliver asks in what is perhaps her most famous poem - reflecting on a common grasshopper and on a beautiful and fleeting summer day. “Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?” And she follows that question up with what is perhaps her most famous line:

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?”

We are all going to die. Death and taxes, right? The only reliable parts of life. Attend enough funerals and you come to understand that our death frames the story of our being, it begs the question of the meaning of our life. Who have we been? Who do we want to be?

That's the deeper spiritual lesson of Biblical prophecy and apocalyptic. And that's the underlying meaning of the church asking you for money - even here in the midst of a pandemic. Sure we need to pay people and keep the heat on and tune the organ and all the rest. But the deeper question all of that asks of you and of me is Mary Oliver's question, it's Zephaniah's question and Matthew's question in the Gospel today. What are you doing with your one precious life? With your time? With your abilities and your gifts? With your money, your power, your privilege, your position? What are you doing? And what are you going to do - with the entire substance of your who you are?

That's the question that Stewardship Season asks of you and me and it is a question, the prophets tell us, that has a hard edge to it. It has deep and enduring stakes that we will be held accountable to. We who believe in God believe also that there is justice in this world. There is good and evil. And there will come a reckoning. Our choices matter. God will ask us however God asks these things what God is asking us right now: How are you living?

Jesuit William Barry wrote that, “We must try to discern in our time and place how God wants us to live our lives in this world in tune with God's Spirit, the one divine action at work in this universe...”

We must discern in our particular time and place, in the specific circumstances of our unique lives, how we respond to the Spirit, to that divine action at work in this universe.

God has given us so much - sunrises and sunsets, birdsong and loved ones, water to drink and air to breathe. And we've been given our own brief human lives - with all of our gifts and skills, our passions and interests, our struggles and our failures, our successes and our strivings, our bank accounts and the spare coats and scarves in our closets. And we're asked, sometimes gently and sometimes with fiery prophecy, to account for what we're doing with all that we have, with all that we are, with all that we might yet be.

Zephaniah asks the question in portents of doom, Jesus asks in parables, and we at Saint Thomas ask in colorful emails and lovely testimonials and in sermons from right up here - we ask in different ways but the questions are the same.

“Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?”