

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time - Luke 21:5-19

A Bible study group was discussing the unforeseen possibility of their sudden death. The leader of the discussion said, "We will all die someday, and none of us really knows when, but if we did we would all do a better job of preparing ourselves for that inevitable event."

"Everybody shook their heads in agreement with this comment."

Then the leader said to the group, "What would you do if you knew you only had 4 weeks of life remaining before your death?"

A gentleman said, "I would go out into my community and minister the Gospel to those that have not yet accepted the Lord into their lives."

"Very good!" said the group leader, and all the group members agreed, that would be a very good thing to do.

One lady spoke up and said enthusiastically, "I would dedicate all of my remaining time to serving God, my family, my church, with a greater conviction."

"That's wonderful!" the group leader commented, and all the group members agreed, that would be a very good thing to do.

But one gentleman in the back finally spoke up loudly and said, "I would go to my mother-in-laws house for the 4 weeks."

Everyone was puzzled by this answer, and the group leader ask, "Why your mother-in-law's home?"

He said, "Because that would be the **longest** 4 weeks of my life!"

Today's gospel is filled with signs of the end of the world: wars, and famines, and dreadful things. Clearly the Gospel writers are pointing to that great day when Jesus will return, bring this world to an end, and establish the Kingdom.

But it would be a mistake for us to limit the meaning of today's Gospel to that great event at the end of time. For the truth is that in our lives we experience moments when our world comes to an end.

There are moments of passage, moments of change, when one world ends and another begins. These moments can be joyful or frightening. Oftentimes they are both.

When you commit yourself to another person in marriage or when you give birth to a new son or daughter, your world changes. There are new opportunities and there are new responsibilities. Very soon you cannot even remember the way things used to be.

When you are told that you no longer have a job, when you file for divorce, when you receive a negative medical diagnosis, when the person you love dies; one world ends and a new one begins.

As much as you would like, you cannot go back again. When your youngest child leaves for college, when you hold your grandchild for the first time in your arms, when you enter retirement; your world changes and you must change with it.

In all of these rites of passage, in all of these changes—even when they are joyful—there is always some fear. Will I be able to be the parent that my child needs me to be? How will it be living without my children under my roof? How will I face the holidays without the person I love? How will I deal with chemotherapy and radiation?

When we face a new reality, when we enter a new world, there is fear. How do we deal with it? How do we cope when our world changes?

Well, today's Gospel points us in a direction. Jesus says, "By your **perseverance** you will save your lives." Jesus is saying that when we enter a new world we must be willing to persevere. So what do we mean by perseverance?

You can define perseverance in a lot of different ways, but the understanding I am suggesting to you today is one which is most common and most practical.

This is the understanding that I hear over and over again in ICU units and at wedding receptions, in funeral homes and at baptisms.

It's the understanding of perseverance that most easily and commonly comes to our lips: **perseverance is living one day at a time**. Perseverance is refusing to be overwhelmed by all the things that we don't understand and cannot control in the new world in which we must live.

Perseverance is choosing to take one step, the next step—choosing to take that step as best as we can and to keep taking the next step until we end up where we ought to be.

Now this understanding of perseverance can seem foolish to some people. They can ask, "How can you take one step and be sure that you're going anywhere?" "How do you know that that one step will lead you to where you need to be?" "How can you live one day at a time?" "Who is planning for the months and years ahead?"

Now these questions are not pointless. In fact they make a certain amount of sense, **if** we presume that we are living our lives alone.

But Christians have a different perspective. We believe that God is living our lives with us, and that God is in fact guiding us.

We believe that when we take that one step, that next step, God is guiding us in the right direction. We believe that when we live one day at a time, the day that we live is connected to future days which God is planning for our benefit.

With faith we have the freedom to take the next step, to live **this** day, and to leave the rest to God. Now, this understanding of perseverance as living one day at a time is beautifully captured in a prayer by now Saint John Henry Newman.

This prayer would be appropriate to pray every time we leave one world behind and enter a new one. Newman's prayer, which was made into a song, goes like this:

Lead kindly light, amid the encircling gloom. Lead thou me on!

The night is dark, and I am far from home. Lead thou me on!

Keep Thou my feet, I do not ask to see the distant scene—one step enough for me.

Let us then persevere in taking that next step, and let us believe that God is with us and God will lead us on. AMEN.

Hope in Winter

November 14, 2010

Luke 21:5-19

Ted was having a very bad day. He was pushing seventy-five and his arthritis was kicking up. He was now having difficulty doing the simple things that he once took for granted. When he looked at the future, he was frightened. He sat on the window seat of his family room and looked out on a cold December day—barren trees, pelting rain, limited light. Ted was feeling sorry for himself. When he looked at the years to come, he saw little reason for hope. He took out a match to light his pipe and in doing so a flying ember fell on the corduroy cushion on which he was seated and burnt a hole into it.

“Darn it,” he said. His wife Helen, who was crocheting in the same room, lifted her head, “what’s wrong?” she asked. “I’m so sorry, honey,” he said, pointing to the hole in the cushion. Helen walked over and picked up the cushion. With a gentle teasing voice she said, “I don’t know what I’m going to do with you.” She left the room. When she returned, she showed him the cushion. Helen had carefully stitched a happy little flower over the charred hole. “There,” she said, “it’s fixed. Better than ever.” She went back to her crocheting.

Ted looked at the repaired cushion. His eyes filled with tears because he saw in Helen’s carefully stitched repair a symbol of their life together. He had been married to this woman for over fifty years. He knew he was blest to have her because Helen was a repairer of broken dreams, a healer of wounds. By her quiet and caring presence, she was an antidote to fear. As Ted thought of this his spirits rose because he recognized in Helen’s love a sign of God’s love. If his wife could be for him such a sign of life and hope, could he not also trust that God’s love for him was even greater? And if God was a repairer of broken dreams and a healer of wounds, then Ted had nothing to fear.

Today’s gospel is a gospel of hope. But we might not recognize it. We can be distracted by thinking that the gospel is predicting the future, what will happen at the end of time. But actually by the time Luke was writing this passage, the things that he was describing had already taken place. The temple was already destroyed. Wars and earthquakes were occurring. False teachers were leading people astray. Persecutions had begun. So far from predicting future events, Luke was describing the crises and turmoil of his own time. It is in those contemporary challenges that Luke’s call to hope becomes clear. What Luke is telling his audience and us is that it is in the midst of our suffering and turmoil that we should cling to hope. In the midst of our present troubles Christ assures us not a hair of our head will be harmed and by perseverance we will secure our lives. This gospel tells us to persevere, to hold on, not to give up hope. Of course the basis of our hope is not our own cleverness or our confidence that we can resolve all of these crises. Our hope rests in our belief that God is a repairer of broken dreams, a healer of wounds, a God who will protect us and save us.

Therefore today’s gospel invites us to identify in our lives what is broken, who is wounded, and what circumstances lead us close to despair. Once we have identified these difficulties, the gospel advises us to hold on, not to give up hope. God is active and God has a plan that we cannot yet completely see. Therefore we are called to trust in God, believing that people can change, opportunities can emerge, obstacles can be removed, and that God is prepared to use all of these changes to save us. If we can see care and love in a spouse, in a co-worker, or in a close friend, then those gifts challenge us to see an even greater love and care in our God.

Circumstances can surround us and frighten us but God is with us. Therefore do not give up hope. Hang on. By your perseverance you will secure your lives.

The Good That Is Gone

November 18, 2013

Luke 21: 5-19

The setting of today's gospel is important. Jesus and his disciples are in the temple of Jerusalem, and people are commenting how beautiful it is. It is adorned with precious stones and votive offerings. The Jerusalem temple was the pride of every Jew, Jesus and his disciples included. It took years to build at tremendous cost and effort. It was a symbol of Israel's faith in God and at the same time a sign of Jewish identity. The temple was massive, glorious, and good. So when Jesus tells his disciples that it would soon be destroyed, that there would not be one stone left upon another, we can be sure that his disciples were deeply shaken. The sign of their faith, the sign of their nation, would all be taken away!

Now this gospel is not only about the temple of Jerusalem or Jews of the first century. It is about us. We are to see in the temple a sign of the good things in our life, the things that we care for, the things we take pride in, the things we have built by our hands. This gospel reminds us that those good and glorious things can be taken away.

We might have pride in our work, in the job we have performed well and faithfully for years, in the company that we built by our own ideas and efforts. And then, because of a mistake, someone's dishonesty, or downsizing, our livelihood is taken away. We no longer have an income and work that gives us satisfaction.

We might take pride in the family we have built, in the wife or husband that we love, in the children we have raised. We feel blessed in the time and love that we have invested to make our families strong. And then by misunderstanding or divorce or death, the structure of our family is broken. The edifice that we worked so hard to build is undermined. Not one stone is left upon another.

We can justly take pride in the temple of our body. We tried to live well, eat healthy, and exercise. Then there is a surprising diagnosis and further tests and procedures. We realize that our health has been seriously compromised. Our energy, our mobility, our future is all violently thrown down.

We know that there is no guarantee that the good things in our life will always remain. The things that we love, the things we have built, the things we take pride in, like the temple in Jerusalem, can be lost. It is when we recognize this truth, that the words of Jesus become so important. Jesus tells us that when our life falls apart, God will not forget us. When the things we take pride in are destroyed, it is then time to place our pride in God's faithfulness. When we feel alone and powerless, then we must believe that God's power is real and active.

The most important line in the gospel is the last line where Jesus says "...by your perseverance you will secure your lives." Perseverance means our ability to hold on, to trust in God's care. We cannot always rebuild the good things in our life that are destroyed, but we can continue to live.

The Jews were never able to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, but they continue to flourish as a people in our world today. So can we. When our life lies in ruins, then it is time to trust, then it is time to persevere, then it is time to hold on, believing that by the grace of God we can secure our lives.