
Twenty-first Sunday in Pentecost

November 6, 2011

Matthew 25: 1-13

Psalm 76

I Thessalonians 4: 13-18

“But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.”

If while you were listening to those words from I Thessalonians that Simon Luc just read you found yourself rather credulous and struggling, well, don’t feel too bad: you are in very good company. The apostle Paul in writing it knows it is new information: “we do not want you to be uninformed”, he begins... and so he proceeds to inform them, presumably about something they have not heard yet or, at least, in quite the same way.

We know right away what the issue is and what Paul’s intention for writing is: some people in that small church in northern Greece have died and Paul wants to give them hope. There is no need to grieve as much as others do, he says... and then he proceeds to tell them why.

Now, imagine... or just think back... about all the things you have heard and probably said to someone in grief, to help provide some measure of hope, of comfort. Most of us are probably pretty reluctant to say too much... but we have all said something.

Not all of it was likely helpful. I was at a funeral for another minister, with the church packed, full of good United Church folk, listening to the sermon which was not very inspired – fair enough – but my ears really perked up when I heard him say, “hold on to your memories, for that is all we have left.” Memories... that is all that is left. I sat up and looked around the sanctuary unbelieving, wondering if anyone else was wondering if they had just wandered into a convention of atheists. With my memory, which is almost non-existent, I did not find much hope or comfort or understanding in that exhortation to remember. Even those who remember well, forget. Time dulls the memory.

There is a wealth of stuff that might have been said: something about resurrection, heaven, living with God, eternal life, the bosom of Abraham, the soul – the Christian tradition has spoken about these things in a whole host of ways.

But out of all the many things that might have been said, Paul tells this story: just as Jesus died and rose again, so will those who have died. They will do so on that day coming soon when a great cry goes out and the heavenly trumpets blow and the highest angels call out and Jesus descends into the atmosphere, and the dead rise up to meet him in the clouds and all the rest

of us who have not died also rise up into the skies, into this glorious, renewed, re-enlivened community of the faithful saints who will live with Jesus forever.

So, Paul ends... encourage each other with this story. Right.

Let me check: how many of you have tried to comfort a grieving family with that story? Alan? Gerald? Anyone else? Has anyone even read this text at a funeral service?

Clearly, we have something to learn here, our “growing edge.”

We moderns are very cautious in what we say about death or, at least, about any sense of hope around death. It may be because our past century saw so much senseless, cruel death that saying anything hopeful at all might appear to diminish our outrage and deep grief, as if we were saying that it is somehow acceptable.

I can't imagine Paul lived in some kind of denial about death. He lived, after all, in the Roman Empire, in occupied territory, as a member of an oppressed and generally hated Jewish people. He saw crucifixions; he witnessed stonings. Death must have seemed in his world, too, to have the final word.

But his response was a vigorous, even enthusiastic, counter-story. Death does not have the final word. The true story is not one of tenuous life, followed by forgotten death.

The true story is that all, dead or living, will be caught up into that great company of God's people – not just caught up but snatched up, grabbed up, almost “kidnapped into” that communion of saints, God not just receiving the dead and living but pursuing and grabbing hold and gathering up... clutching us, holding us close. The dead not lost but sought and found... they even precede those who are alive.

Imagine... and you do have to use your imagination. This is not scientific talk going on here. This is not some kind of future-telling. This is the witness to a truth beyond description; this is a story, almost a poem, that cannot be as truthful if it is told in some other manner.

So... imagine: when you are faced with death, maybe your own or the death of a loved one, imagine the trumpets sounding and archangels crying out and God actually coming down... not just passively sitting and waiting but coming down and grabbing up that loved one in order to join them with this celestial company of the faithful.

No translucent ghosts slowly floating from a still body... no big line-ups at the Pearly Gates while St. Peter checks you off in a huge leather book... no vague ephemeral existence sitting around in limbo waiting for your turn before God's throne... and certainly no nothingness or emptiness of the grave...

but an active, loving, welcoming, God who leaves heaven itself to snatch us up...

... maybe like the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son, who sees his son from afar and rushes off down the road to greet him and who grabs him in a big bear-hug of an embrace.

Imagine that, says Paul, and be encouraged.

Just as Jesus has been raised, so the dead shall be raised. This isn't just about us; this is about Jesus. We are united in this same story with Jesus. We aren't Jesus – Paul is clear about that –

but we can't know our life without thinking about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Elsewhere he reminds us that through our baptism we were baptized into his life, and also into his death, and not only that but also into his new life. He tells the Romans, "if we become united with him in a death like his, we shall also be united with him in a resurrection like his."

Imagine that, he says... one with Jesus, in life, in death, in life beyond death. It is not that something happened to Jesus and something else happens to us. When you think of the death of yourself or one another, think of Jesus. You aren't Jesus... but your life is caught up, grabbed up, into that storyline of Jesus... you or your loved one. We don't know ourselves, our lives, our destiny, our deaths, until we know Jesus... and when we do we know that death is not the final word but... resurrection... new life. Life embraced by God.

I know we are pretty quiet and soft-spoken and vague at funerals, out of respect, I guess, for the real grief and pain of the bereaved. And I am not recommending that that not be the case. But every once in a while we also need to remind ourselves that death does not have power over us, that in union with Christ we know that the dead are raised and are met more than halfway by the exuberant welcome of God. Trumpets blaring. Archangels crying out. Paul didn't say this but I suspect the choirs of angels will be singing. Rejoicing and glad reunion and, I suspect, some fireworks display.

Imagine that...

And if that is not enough, Paul goes one step further.

All of this happens, he says, "at the coming of the Lord"... and with that one little phrase we are instantly reoriented... and all of this we have already talked about and described is placed in a bigger story, a hugely rich story, the story of "the coming of the Lord" which draws on the Jewish story of "the day of the Lord... the last days, the days of God's final victory over injustice and sin and all the vagaries of life.

Imagine again...

... imagine God coming down and grabbing up those who have died, trumpets, angels and all that... and all of this happening in those days when at the very same time the lion lies down with the lamb, the child plays harmlessly with the poisonous snake, a great feast is laid out for all the peoples of the world, when the hungry are fed, the thirsty find drink, the lonely are enveloped in community, the sick are healed, the blind see, the oppressed go free, the prisoners are released, the humble are exalted. Imagine all of this, all at the same time, when justice prevails, when peace and righteousness kiss, when love never fails.

Creation is healed. That time for which all creation has been groaning and longing has come with liberty and splendor.

We have been timid to speak about Christian hope in the face of death but Paul's exuberance reminds us of streets paved with gold, a river of life, a new earth and new heaven, where God wipes away every tear from our eyes.

Imagine that....

It is a strange paradox that it was the American slaves who sung most exuberantly about such wild, extravagant hope in the face of death. They cried, to be sure, but they sung.

A Marxist might say they were being duped; that their singing prolonged their slavery. A Freudian might say that they suffered under an illusion. A humanist might see it as a triumph of the human spirit. I guess there are a lot of ways you could view it.

Those that sang probably just saw it as telling the truth. The day was coming, and coming soon, when the trumpets would sound and God's victory over injustice and even over death would set them free from slavery and sweep them up into the joyous liberty of the people of God, joining them with the faithful through all time, the dead first, followed by all others, and gathering them into the tender embrace of God. "Oh, when the trumpet sounds its call... oh, when the trumpet sounds its call... Lord, how I want to be in that number, when the trumpet sounds its call."

Imagine that....

Just imagine that....

Thanks be to God.

Amen