

Pentecost XXIV (Proper 28 B)  
November 15, 2009

St. Margaret's  
Annapolis

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

If you're familiar with "Calvin and Hobbes" cartoons, you know that there are whole books of them, and that each one tells a story. For those of you who don't know these two wonderful characters, Calvin is a precocious little boy of about six or so, and Hobbes is his stuffed tiger – who is quite alive and interactive only with Calvin.

In one old "Calvin and Hobbes" cartoon, Calvin has been sent outside because he had been making resolutions for his father. Calvin is on his little soapbox, ranting about New Years and new years. He complains that every year is the same, with all the same problems, even though the future is supposed to be better. Hobbes responds, "The problem with the future is that it keeps turning into the present."

Nothing in all the scriptures, nothing in any of the gospels is more troubling than the apocalyptic passages, like the one in today's reading from Mark. Actually, what we heard just now is only the beginning of the thirteenth chapter, and it gets worse! It's one of those passages you don't want to read to your children at night.

In fact, every age believes it is at the brink of the end of time. Every age thinks that it is the most violent, the most corrupt, the most immoral in history. And every age has its predictions that the end is near.

I remember during the Cuban missile crisis... during those agonizing hours of waiting and wondering if the bombs were going to come... I remember how my boyfriend and I made plans to meet at the lake. We said that, even if we had to walk, we would make our way and meet there. Looking back, that all seems far away and, given the outcome, somewhat melodramatic. But at the time, it was very real. It seemed all too possible that the end was near.

More recently, we had all that hoop-de-la about Y2K, remember? Folks were putting up bottled water, getting cash reserves, ordering extra prescriptions, buying generators, and stocking up on canned food. And now, there is some dire prediction about 2012!

If we paid more attention to history, we would recognize that such predictions, such fears, are not new on the landscape of the human story. In fact, if we could put human history through a CT scan, we would see that this fear has been present since the beginning of time. Like the medical version of the CT scan, ours would move through history snapping photos like slices of time to be examined and analyzed.

If the first slice of our CT scan was about the time of Mark's church, we would see the sack of Jerusalem in the year 70 of the Common Era; we would see this small group of new believers already suffering persecution. They would remember and understand Jesus' words describing destruction because it was a description of what was happening all around them – the Romans destroying Jerusalem, the Temple in ruins.

As our CT scan moves along, we would see the fall of Rome itself. Then we would see the ravages of the plague; the Dark Ages. We would see faithful monks preserving the

scriptures and keeping the traditions. The next slice would reveal the tumultuous years of the Reformation when it seemed that the Church was falling apart.

Truth be told, every generation could fill in the blanks with lists of tragedies, disasters, turmoil, war, and more. The world seems always on the brink, always about to come to an end.

Jesus knew this about his own time, just as we can look around and know it about ours.

- Who could have ever imagined that we would live to see the Twin Towers fall, and that we would be living in fear of terrorism?
- Who would have ever thought that our public schools would require metal detectors and security guards?
- Who would have thought that a military doctor, a psychiatrist no less, would walk into a facility on base and start shooting people?
- Who could have guessed that in the land of democracy, we would come to revile politics?
- And all the while, we are still at the mercy of nature: hurricanes, earthquake, and fire!

Truth be told, we always live on the edge of fear; fear that one way or another, the end is near. That is exactly what Jesus was addressing: our longing for safety and permanence in a world of danger and change. And he was observing how we live on the edge, ready to run for the hills, ready to believe anyone who offers us comforting answers. Later in this same chapter, he goes on to say: "... of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels... but only [God]." But that hardly seems to help.

How, then, are we to deal with all this? When fear laps around our feet like rising waters, how are we to live faithfully? How do we turn from fear to hope? *Because that's exactly what Jesus was offering.* He was telling us that no matter what happens, no matter how bad it gets, *God is near.*

The problem, of course, is that it's not always easy to see the evidence of God's nearness. So to illustrate what we are to do, how we are to live, Jesus tells a story: it's like a man going on a journey... when he leaves, he puts his servants in charge and commands the doorkeeper to be on watch.

Put another way: it's like... say, taking off to live in Europe for a time... and saying to the house sitter: remember that this is my property, but treat this place like it's your own. I'm not sure when I'll be back, but have everything ready – you never know when I'll show up. So watch for me.

Jesus said to them (and says to us): watch and be ready.

So, then, we are to live in the now and be on the ready. But that is easier said than done.

Psychologist William Marston asked three thousand people: What have you to live for? He was shocked to discover that 94% were simply enduring the present while they waited for the future... waited for something to happen, waited for next year... waited for a better time. While that might sound like hope, it is actually quite the opposite. To simply endure is close to despair.

Back now to the gospel of Mark: Mark isn't telling these disturbing things to his struggling little church to frighten them. Nor is he telling them these things so that they will despise the present and look for hope in the unknown future. No. He is telling them (and us) to live *in* the present *with* hope.

Now, I could tell you some things to do to nurture this ability to live in the present and to live with hope. I could tell you, but you probably know them already... I mean, after all, you're *here*, for goodness sake! Things like worship. Like praying and studying the Bible. Like practicing patience and kindness and love until, like a well exercised muscle, they become second-nature.

But the thing we all most need to hear... the thing we most need in order to nurture hope and life and goodness in us... is to SLOW DOWN. There is simply no way to embrace this way of life without slowing our pace.

The story goes that a group of European traders in colonial Africa were making their way from the interior to the coast as fast as they could. But their porters kept falling further and further behind, until one day they just sat down. Bewildered, the traders asked why, and they replied, "We are waiting for our souls to catch up to our bodies."

Maybe we stay so busy, maybe rush through life so that we won't have time to be afraid. But by running from fear instead of facing it, we are also running from hope. To nurture hope, we must sit down (at least from time to time) and let our souls catch up with us. And this is the gospel truth!

Meanwhile, Calvin and Hobbes again: Calvin is dressing, feeling powerful and happy as he leaves for school. The day, however, is a disaster. He sits on bubble gum, is caught copying answers, gets beaten up by the bully, falls asleep at his desk, and misses his bus. On the way home, he's caught in a horrendous rain storm. At bed time, he says, "You know, Hobbes, some days even my lucky rocketship underpants don't help."

There's no way to get around it: terrible things will happen in the world, and will happen to us. There will be times when it will seem like the end, and times when we want to give up. But we are Christians, called to live in hope. None of us knows when our own end will come, nor the end of time. What we are promised is only this: God is near.

Amen.

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