Proper 27 A

November 12, 2017

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All Saints’, Wolcott

I’ve been thinking a lot this week about brides and bridegrooms, and even bridesmaids, in the light of the wedding yesterday of Lorraine DiMauro and Frank Hegedus. Both of them are in their 70’s; both of them were widowed; both have families that love and care about them. The groom’s son was his best man; the bride’s daughter was her matron of honor. None of those four people could have expected, even five years ago, that Frank and Lo would be standing at this altar yesterday, in the presence of God and many friends, reciting vows which will take them through the rest of their lives and into the next life, face to face with Jesus the Christ. Truly, none of us knows what to expect in this life, except that it will, one day, come to an end, and for that momentous occasion, we come together each Sunday to be reminded of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has led the way for us to that place which he has prepared for us in the fullness of the kingdom of God. None of us knows exactly when that will take place, but we come to be reminded of love, and we come to be reminded of mercy and grace, and we come to be reminded that death is not the end, but only the gateway to new and everlasting life.

We come to stand as spiritual descendants of Joshua, who centuries ago succeeded Moses as the leader of the wandering and somewhat rebellious people Israel; who led them over the river Jordan into the Land of Promise; who proclaimed with fervor, “Choose this day whom you will serve . . . as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

The early followers of Jesus remembered that he had promised that he would return, and they waited with baited breath for what they called “the Day of the Lord,” when Jesus would come again, destroy their enemies, and take them with him into the kingdom which they remembered him talking about, and which they mistakenly thought he would finally establish on this earth. They waited. And they waited. And they waited. As time went on, and Jesus did not return in their lifetimes, they began to get confused, and angry, and their faith slipped, even as did that of the ancient Israelites in the desert. None of them was getting any younger. Suppose they were to die *before* the Lord’s return? What would happen to them then? And what about their parents or other loved ones who had already died? They were genuinely worried about not being able to board the heavenly train when Jesus returned to gather up those on the platform. You’ve heard questions like that today. What about little babies who die before they’re baptized? What about Jews and Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists, and atheists, and even those once-faithful Christians who, for one reason or another have fallen away from the Church? What about *them*? Who will be included on that fateful day? They weren’t prepared for the long-term, only for day-to-day faith. Do we ever stand in those shoes? Of course we do! And that’s why we come to church, to find in the community of faith, in the repetition of word and sacrament, the strength of the promise of Christ to be with us always, through this life, through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and into the resurrection life which is promised to us.

The centerpiece of this morning’s readings is the Letter of Paul to the Church at Thessalonika. Paul had established that congregation with a decade or so of Jesus’ death and resurrection. It was when he began hearing murmurings of annoyance with the gospel message that he wrote to the Thessalonians his first letter, a message of hope and encouragement. His words have been read at funerals in the Episcopal Church for a long, long time. Don’t worry about those who have already died, he says. They’re all safe. “For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.” There’s no limit on who can come along, or even on when to be at the station. A seat has been reserved for every person who ever was or will be born. That’s because Jesus himself IS the train, and his own death and resurrection have opened the way of heaven to us all. “Therefore encourage one another with these words,” says the Apostle Paul.

While Paul comforts us with the expectation of the rescue that comes with our Lord, Matthew reminds us that the expectation of that stupendous event even now affects our day-to-day existence. A lot of people think that “watchfulness” is the focus of this Gospel story. I think it’s not so much about watchfulness as it is about being prepared, in the face of the uncertainty about the time of Christ’s return. Today? Tomorrow? Four years from now? Four hundred years from now? The parable of the ten bridesmaids reminds us that Christians are to live as if Christ is coming at any moment, while simultaneously planning for the long haul. That way, as the figurative bride – the Church – we have a glimpse into the banqueting hall even before the bridegroom arrives to sweep us up and carry us over the threshold.

So what do we do while we wait? Well, we could stop worrying about things we can’t control, and concentrate on the things we can. We can make wills, to provide for our families and our church families in the future, for instance. We can give thanks for those whose lives have touched ours in whatever ways, by the grace of God. We can love, even as God has loved us, in giving of ourselves, for heaven’s sake. This Veterans’ Day weekend (once called Remembrance Day), we can intentionally remember and honor all those who have given of themselves in the service of this country, that we might live in freedom. We can work to make the lives of veterans better – especially those who are homeless.

These days, we hear more and more about the fear of war in known and unknown forms; fear of terrorism, both international and domestic, shootings in schools, churches, theaters and other places of community, corporate failures, disasters of the natural world, harsh political divisions, and the struggling economy. One thing we should not have to fear is our reunion with our Savior.

We can’t control the end time. We don’t know *when* Jesus Christ will return. But surely it can’t be a bad thing to live as if he might be coming tomorrow! Maybe one clue as to the best use of our time would be to look at how the Bible tells us Jesus occupied *himself* while he was in our shoes. As I recall, he spent a lot of time fraternizing with the folks who were the marginalized and the outcasts. He refused to idolize the comforts of the material world and insisted that his followers do the same. He spent a lot of time in prayer. He went out of his way to help those in need.

I’ve been reflecting on all that this week, following the All Saints’ Day service in which we reaffirmed our Baptismal promises; promises like continuing in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers. (That means going to church regularly.) Promises like persevering in our resistance of evil, seeking and serving Christ in all persons, striving for justice *and* peace, and respecting the dignity of every human being, no matter what their race, creed, age, gender, social status, sexual orientation, ability or disability may be. Poverty, disease, and intolerance know no particular age or class. Good stewardship of our lives calls us to resist all such evils.

Living in hope, with an expectation of the return of Christ is like that: living in ways that show our Christian prudence and preparedness, making decisions and choosing actions that show to ourselves and others a glimpse of the promised Kingdom, even as we wait and hope for the second coming of the King of kings. This world *will* come to an end at some point for each of us, but since the whole earth belongs to God, we do well to keep in mind the promise with which Jesus himself comforts us at the very end of Matthew’s Gospel; those most-famous words which underlie every word of Scripture: “I will be with you,” he says, “until the end of the age.”