

Provoke Love and Good Deeds

Sermon for the Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, November 14, 2021

Readings: Daniel 12:1-3; Psalm 16 ; Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25; Mark 13:1-8

Sermon text: And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:25

Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.

Well, when will this be and what signs are we to look for to prepare? The disciples naturally want to know.

Jesus then tells them to watch out for false signs—war and rumors of war; earthquakes, famines. These are not the signs of an imminent end. They are merely the beginnings of the birthpangs.

All creation groans in labor as it awaits the birth of the children of light, Paul writes in Romans 8:19-22. And we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Holy Spirit, wait with eagerness the redemption of our bodies .

But when that will be, in what year, or century, or even millennium is not clear. God knows; we do not (as Jesus elsewhere pointed out.) A day of God's time may be a thousand years in our sight reads Psalm 90. so learn to number your days with wisdom. Reckoning the day as always coming closer—we are nearer salvation than we first began Paul elsewhere writes—but like seeing a ship in the hazy distance, we are unclear as to exactly where or when or even if it is coming soon. Maybe it is going the other way.

There have been plenty of wars since Jesus' day, plenty of earthquakes and famines too. And I do not see a shortage of wars and rumors or war, fires, floods, droughts, famine refuges—the four horsemen of the apocalypse—soon. Indeed, I think this is about the most apocalyptic feeling I have had in my lifetime, with the possible exception of crawling under school desks in elementary school during the missile crisis of 1963 (I know that dates me!).

Speaking of the four horsemen, we are studying the book of Revelation in our Bible Study class on Wednesday mornings. It's a wild ride full of apocalyptic vision of the catastrophes to come before the final marriage of heaven and earth. Buckle your seat belt. The seventh seal has been opened—followed by

what scripture says in a half and hour of silence in heaven (imagine that!). We are in the part where the angel Wormwood plunges from heaven into the ocean poisoning it and killing a third of all living things in it. Someone said, how did this book get into the Bible anyway—it seems so different from the gospels, so wild and crazy and full of fear and death. well. look at mark 13 I said—our text this morning—sometimes called Mark’s little apocalypse. It also speaks of coming catastrophes and wars.

The end is near—the familiar sign in New Yorker cartoons. Well, that’s what John the baptist said, wasn’t it. We will be getting to him soon, two weeks in Advent. And I will speak more then on the book of Revelation and the second coming of Christ.

This morning I want to look at a line or two from the letter to the Hebrews we just heard read. Hebrews is another biblical book we don’t often study or talk about—so full of obscure references to Melchizedek and talk of Jesus as a sort of high priest whose perfect sacrifice of self took away the need for more sacrifices. And instead of visions approaches understanding Jesus as inaugurating the coming of the really real—the original model made in heaven—to replace the shadowy replicas made by humans on earth, including the torah or law of Moses. As the author writes in Hebrews 10:1: “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves.”

Well, the unknown author of Hebrews concludes his discussion of Jesus as high priest with stand fast in faith: “since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.” (I talked about the cleansing of the heart with the tears of repentance last week, just as baptism is the outward washing of the body.)

Then the author continues with this exhortation to hope: “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

Isn’t that a wonderful line: let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds. I like that idea a lot better than provoking each other to mischief, distrust and hate—which certainly seems to be the goal of lots of social media.

And I may add the recent findings confirming what is obvious already: that social media, far from bringing people together, tends to isolate heavy users from actual contact and belonging. Virtual reality is like the shadowy forms of the law Hebrews says are a poor copy of the real thing made in heaven—and available to us now. So let us indeed not neglect to meet together—as is the habit of some (you know who you are), but encourage—provoke!—each other to gather, love and do good. wow. Sounds like church could be helpful here. Invite someone to church. Come back if you have wandered off. Connect even if you are distant and watching online—you are still part of the body!

And all the more as you see the Day approaching. The Day of the Lord—that hoped for but also dreaded day of fire and judgment, followed by consummation, peace and joy. That seems to be the pattern of God, as I pointed out last week: life, death and new life; Incarnation, Cross and Resurrection.

Like a good boy scout, be prepared. After all, Jesus “went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified” (A Collect for Fridays, BCP 56). We must expect to undergo the ordinary trials and hardships of life—and even the extraordinary and terrible ones that may befall us—though of course we still pray to God to “save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.”

But preparation is not a cause to lack hope, faith, love or joy. God is almighty; Jesus has triumphed over death; there is always hope, and there will always be opportunities for love.

Let me conclude with one such story:

As the COP 26 conference on climate change in Glasgow wraps up, we hear of targets and agreements to reduce carbon emissions and so on, as well as dire warnings that even doing so much as we promise—itsself unlikely—will not be enough to avoid climate *catastrophe* (we are only in a climate *crisis* now!). But warnings may well help exhort people to actions, as well as the economics of oil prices, and most of all the increasing knowledge about better ways of doing things—with less but achieving more. Often a very simple solution can be found. For instance, Grace Church co-sponsored a documentary last week together with Millbrook library and Glynwood Center for Regenerative Agriculture called *To Which We Belong*. It will become more widely available soon if you weren't there (and not many were), but the story of the documentary is not more sad stories of industrial farming and the drought and hardships of farming—but the great strides made in places from Montana to Chihuahua to Kenya in restoring grasslands through close herded livestock—emulating the close herding of

herbivores like bison and so on which moved closely together and thus intensively hoofed up the ground, dropped by a bunch of manure and moved on. The grass instead of getting plowed or overgrazed gets replenished. And an amazing amount of carbon gets sequestered. Other practices like no-till farming and coastal kelp farming are also making great progress. I won't go into details but it is an inspiring story—cutting across partisan lines, finding new applications all over, making ecological and economic sense, and promising truly game-changing possibilities. Good news for a change on the farming and climate front.

And hold on to the small local stories too. The neighbors rallying to help a family in need in Millerton find a new home. The smiles and laughter of children—the wit and wisdom of a very elderly English lady reading a funny poem about children getting eaten by lions at the zoo—truly funny—at the library. That's a good place to gather as well, as our Grace Year fellow Kristin knows. And church is even better—for we here we gather not only to learn and support and laugh together. But we come together with God, Trinity in Unity—relationship itself.

What could be better than that?

In christ's name, Amen.

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