



24 PENTECOST C 04 (PR 28)

14 November 2004

Malachi 4:1-2a

Psalm 98

2 thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19

Don't blame me, I'm just the messenger. If you've been listening carefully this morning to the readings and to the Gospel, you know what I'm talking about. Gloom and doom. Literally. In the prophet Malachi we hear that a day is coming, burning like an oven. In St. Luke we hear that the temple—all temples?—will be destroyed. We hear that there will be wars and insurrections, great earthquakes, famines, plagues, betrayal, hate, and some put to death. Makes you glad you came to church this morning doesn't it?

But what did we come out to hear? Did we come to hear that because we are faithful everything is going to be hunky-dory? Did we come out to hear that if we persevere, if we work hard, individually, as a community, as a nation we will not only be safe but continue on the path of monetary and moral upward mobility? But Pastor, I was always told that the United States has been blessed, materially, militarily, mightily because we are a Christian nation, because in the pledge we say we are one nation under God, because we preserve and enforce the democratic order of the world. I was always taught Pastor that the faithful receive blessing upon blessing. Are you telling me that that isn't true?

Don't blame me. I'm just the messenger. I really did not want to preach this sermon. But it's those damned texts. They leave me no choice. They leave me no choice but to tell you that God does not seem all that eager to bless the top of the food chain after all. It's those texts that say that the God of the Hebrews, the God of Jesus will not abandon those at the bottom, will not abandon those whose lives are a catastrophe, will not abandon those who can't get themselves from Point A to Point B without getting completely lost. It's those texts that say, however, that the God of the Hebrews, the God of Jesus, hides, has hidden, will continue to hide God's self from those on top, from those who think they've got it all together, from those who live lives of ease: you know, those in control of the temples, those in control of nations and kingdoms, those who think they've harnessed the forces of nature, those who have the wealth of the nations sown up in their luxurious ways of life. For most of us, today's readings sound like bad news because we are precisely those who have the most to lose in the world that today's readings place before our eyes. I happen to like my life just the way it is – especially since I've moved into a beautiful, new rowhouse close to work, a house filled with beautiful things. If I were already on the down and out, today's readings might indeed seem, if not good news, then really no news at all. If I were living poor in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Palestine, what's one more war? What's one more earthquake? What's one more mosque or church becoming dust? Hunger is hunger. Chaos is chaos. The readings describe nothing much out of the ordinary for those who are already down and out. But for those of us living in the United States of America, the greatest, wealthiest, mightiest Empire the world has ever known – these readings chill us to the bone.

Gloom and doom. Ruin and chaos. Suffering and death. Are they the will of God? The readings won't say – they don't let us in on that mystery. I prefer to think that rather than declaring it is God's will that kingdoms, nations, and empire fall, these readings describe what inevitably does and will happen. There will be no human ascent. Our human nature – the need for each of us to be Number One, winner take all; the need for us individually and as nations to wreak vengeance; the need to fix blame on someone outside

ourselves, outside our tribe, outside our nation – those things are sufficient guarantee that all human attempts to ascend to the heights are doomed to failure.

Even though I can't say – I won't say — that the terrors described in today's readings are God's will, I can say, I have taken a solemn oath to say, that God will not be absent on that day when all things are brought low. In Malachi we hear God's promise that on that day when everything shall go to pieces, on the day that will burn like an oven and all our arrogance and evil shall be as stubble, for those who are in God – that's you through the promises of Christ – for you, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. In that day when all things are brought low – and that day will surely come — those in Christ – that's you, the baptized, the people of the promise – even though some may be put to death – not a single hair of any of your heads will ever, ever perish. It is the promise of Christ, that there in the chaos God will find you. By the promise of Christ, love will walk among the ruins. God wills to be where everything is darkest – for it is in the darkness that the light of Christ shines, and the darkness has not and will not overcome it. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be moved and the mountains be toppled into the sea; though the waters rage and foam and the mountains tremble at its tumult the Lord of Hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge.

And in the meantime – whether the times of trial be near or far off – we will do the work that has been given us to do while it is still daytime, before that time comes when no one can work. We, the children of God, will do what the children of God were made to do by the promises made to us in Holy Baptism – we shall go out and give good care to the earth – we shall plant trees and we shall make clean what we have despoiled; we shall care for those who are vulnerable, for the poor and the homeless, for those who have not justice, for those who know not love; and we shall enjoy the good things of the creation, for God did create all things good. And when the end shall come we will take joy and testify to the hope that is ours, singing God a new song – for in the day when all things born of arrogance and evil shall burn, behold, the sun of righteousness shall rise from among the ashes – with healing – and wholeness – and life – in its wings. This is God's promise given to you in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ – a life, death, and resurrection that today are made yours.

This is the Word of the Lord . . .