

Burning like an Oven

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

Malachi 4:1-2a; Psalm 98; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

13 November 2022

For nearly two thousand years, Christians have been anticipating the end of all things when Christ will return, bringing justice and equity, making all things new and right and good. When I was a kid, I heard Jesus's woe to pregnant women in the last days, and came to the conclusion that the end will arrive when there are no more pregnancies. Every time I saw a pregnant woman at church, I would think that this woman had single-handedly delayed Jesus's return another nine months. And I'd reset my stopwatch.

Christians are right to anticipate the return of Christ and the end of this age. Our Gospel authors tell us to keep awake! Be ready! For we don't know when Jesus will return. But a lack of historical consciousness has led many Christians to believe that the end was happening in *their* lifetime, so they'd quit their work and brace for the rapture. Our lessons highlight this tension for us today: our call to be ready for Christ's return while embracing our call to keep at work. This calling gives us the perspective we need to be peculiarly faithful in the present time. This morning I want to suggest that we ready ourselves for Christ's return *by* keeping at our work.

The expectation of Jesus's return and the call to faithful work in the present are two key themes of 1 and 2 Thessalonians. New Testament scholar Jouette Bassler notes that one of Paul's main concerns in 1 Thessalonians was to "reassure his readers that Jesus's Second Coming (Greek *parousia*) could occur at any moment and to urge them to remain vigilant," but 2 Thessalonians corrects some misunderstandings that had arisen, such as the thinking that "the day of Jesus' return had already arrived" (NRSV, 2011). This misunderstanding in 1st century Thessalonica continues for some Christians to this day. The day of Jesus's return was not in the first century, nor is it today. It's quite possible, in fact, that we're still in the early days of the church.

As we consider how to ready ourselves for Christ's return, I'd like to identify three mistakes Christians commonly make, and then suggest what it might look like for us to be faithful, to be people who won't get "burned in the oven," as Malachi puts it.

Mistake #1.

One mistake Christians make is to think that Jesus's return is so near, we can quit our jobs. The author of 2 Thessalonians warns against the temptation to idleness no less than three times in our lesson today. He likens such idle behavior to becoming a busybody – busying ourselves to run out the clock. Instead, the author underlines the importance of Christians keeping at their work. Such work includes not only labor to earn a living, but also the work of the kingdom in "doing what is right." Members of the community in Thessalonica had gotten an overheated expectation of Jesus's return such that they were quitting their jobs and living irresponsibly. Stop doing this, the author tells them, and imitate the apostles by keeping at your work.

The temptation to take a perpetual sabbath is not a temptation to holiness, but to hollowness. It's lazy, idle, and faithless, the author tells us. Christians are called to be people who never tire of living faithfully in a world that does not believe in God.

So one mistake some Christians make is having such an overheated expectation of Jesus's return that they quit their jobs. This irresponsibility can take many forms, and involves everything from resigning work to wrecking creation. Just because Jesus will return, don't quit being a disciple. That's the first mistake.

Mistake #2.

The second mistake is like it. The second mistake Christians make in expecting Christ's return is to give in to despair that God will not set things right. So much is wrong with the world today. We see inequities in housing, health care, education, and quality of life at local, national, and global levels. Lies, deceit, and exploitation seem to rule the day. Warmongers stay in power while the innocent suffer with no end in sight. The temptation to despair that God's justice will never arrive is another way Christians fail as disciples.

But our readings today from Malachi and the Psalms give us hope that God will set things right. *See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch (Malachi 4:1).* The conviction that God will give the arrogant and evildoers their due is one that runs throughout the story of scripture, but perhaps most prominently among the prophets and the Psalms. Don't lose heart, the prophet tells us today, *the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings (Malachi 4:2a).*

Whether the prophet is alluding to Psalm 84:11 in the phrase "sun of righteousness" or providing an alternative to the symbol of deity typical in Egyptian and Mesopotomian religion is not clear. The point seems to be that it's God who will bring about healing in our world. This is the main thrust of Psalm 98. God has done marvelous things. God has brought victory with his *right hand and holy arm*. God brings vindication and victory by judging the world and all people with righteousness and equity. I find it incredibly comforting that scripture gives regular witness to the fear that the wicked won't get caught or convicted. Make no mistake, Malachi and the psalter remind us today, they will have their day in the oven.

We can avoid the mistakes of idleness and despair by affirming with Malachi and the Psalter that God will bring justice and equity. God will bring healing and victory. Despite evidence to the contrary, we need not despair, God will intervene to set things right, to put the arrogant and evildoers in their place, like in a burning oven. Our job, in the meantime, is to keep at the good work God has given us to do. We prepare for Jesus's return, by keeping at our work. And our work is to be faithful.

Mistake #3.

A third mistake Christians make is to forget that God is God. We are not the hero of the story. It's not our job to make things come out right, to give the wicked their due, or to accomplish everlasting peace and justice in the world, as if we could. That's God's job. This means that we can make mistakes in our journey of discipleship. We can suffer earthquakes, famines, plagues, and persecution. We can even suffer death, and this will not derail God's story. Our job in the present is to keep pointing to God, to keep testifying, as Jesus tells us in our Gospel lesson, even when we are betrayed by parents and brothers, relatives and friends. Jesus tells us that such hardships are opportunities for us to keep being disciples who witness to the world the difference Christ makes.

Sam Wells's book *Improvisation* has been a key book for our congregation. We've studied it in Sunday School, many of you have read it in class, and it remains for me and our staff a crucial book for thinking about discipleship and ministry. One of Sam's great contributions in this book is his discussion of the Five Act Play.

Act One is Creation. God created the world because there was so much love in God, between the Father, Son, and Spirit, that it overflowed into creation. God was not lonely. God was not needy. God was full of love, so God created. The Fall is one way to understand how we misused our freedom, and failed to return God's love.

Act Two is Israel. This is a love story. In Act two God covenanted with Israel to make a new people possible. And it's largely a story of Israel falling in and out of love with God.

Act Three is Jesus. This is the center of the story, where "the author enters the drama" and reveals God's character. In Act three all the important things have happened. In Act 3 Jesus accomplishes the salvation of the world as he conquers sin, death, and the devil.

Act Five is the End. The theological term for this is eschaton. The End is still to come, and it will be God's doing.

Act Four is the Church. We are in Act four right now, and it's our job to be faithful to Jesus in Act 3, in anticipation of what God will do in Act Five. In Act Four God gives us everything we need to be faithful and "to continue to be [Jesus'] body in the world" (54). We have received the Holy Spirit, the Eucharist, and a ton of gifts to sustain us for the journey. We receive many of these gifts every Sunday here in worship.

We are in Act Four. It's God's job to bring about the End in Act 5, and in Christ, in Act 3, God has already done all the important things. Our job in Act Four is to be faithful to Jesus as we await what God will do in the End. That's it. Nothing more, nothing less.

We're not the hero of the story. Jesus is. And it's not our job to bring about the end of the story. God will do that. But in the meantime, we can't be lazy or idle. We can't despair or lose hope.

Our job right now is to keep working, to keep worshiping God as we give the world a glimpse of the difference Christ makes possible.

Being an End-time people is not about speculating about signs, quitting our work, or drinking the Kool Aid. Being an End-time people is not about throwing up our hands in despair at the plight of the world. And being an End-time people does not mean that we should take matters into our own hands because God is asleep at the wheel.

Being an End-time people is about giving witness to the truth that God has saved the world and God will make all things new when he comes to bring justice, equity, and healing to the world. Being an End-time people is about being “hated by all because of my name,” as Jesus tells us today (Luke 21:17). (We should not be surprised when our discipleship provokes the hostility of the world.) And being an End-time people means that we keep at the work of worship and witness, faithfully following Jesus by keeping our promises, telling the truth, and loving our enemies, as we become a family that would have been impossible without the Holy Spirit. We ready ourselves for Jesus’s return by keeping at our work, day and night, every minute and hour, as we witness to the world that God is at work bringing all things to their good End. Thanks be to God.