

Twenty-Sixth Sunday After Pentecost – David Justice

Isaiah 65:17-25; Isaiah 12; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

As some of you already know, I started attending St. Paul's during my atheist/agnostic phase during college, and this church helped and is continuing to help me understand what it means to be a follower of Christ. During my time here, one thing that has been reinforced in my mind is the value of knowing that we are a part of a larger story, and that practicing the traditions of our spiritual forebears is one way to locate ourselves within that story. It is then in an attempt to stay within the sacred tradition of my spiritual elders at St. Paul's that I open this sermon with a story, specifically one drawn from my favorite science fiction films, Star Wars.

In the Star Wars films Luke Skywalker is one of the key persons in the rebellion against the evil galactic empire and is one of the few remaining Jedi Knights, who are the guardians of peace and justice throughout the galaxy. Luke's father, however, is Darth Vader who formerly was a Jedi knight, and is currently second in command of the very evil empire Luke is attempting to overthrow. When Luke discovers this information he understandably doesn't take it very well and things get a bit out of hand; however he later accepts this fact and becomes convinced that his father "still has good in him." He is convinced at least partially due to the fact that Darth Vader is known to be the chosen one, the one who will bring peace and balance back to the force and the galaxy. Luke is so convinced by this prophecy, and perhaps some love for his old man, that he is willingly captured and tortured until Darth Vader comes to his senses and defeats the evil emperor.

I tell this story not just to try to get Miguel to laugh at my terrible pun, but also to suggest that today's texts call us to take up a position similar to Luke Skywalker and faithfully await the redemption that God has promised to us. The theme then that I will be attempting to bring out in each of these passages is hope for redemption in the face of adversity and the apparent absence of God.

This theme is perhaps most evident in today's passages from Isaiah. Both passages have particularly beautiful imagery, speaking of God as a well of salvation and the strength and might of Israel and promising that one day Jerusalem will be a land where there is no weeping or crying, where economic fairness and stability are guaranteed, and a place of peace where even the lion and the lamb will live together in harmony. On top of all of this both of these passages speak of a time where God is fully present with his people; Isaiah 12:6 states that the people ought to "Shout aloud and sing for joy" because "great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel." Similarly in chapter 65 verse 24, it is promised that before God's people call for the Lord, the Lord will answer them. God will literally be so attentive that God's people won't have time to finish their request before God has fulfilled it.

I would like to suggest, however, that the key to understanding these passages is not trying to glean from them an understanding of what the coming kingdom will look like (though that may well be important), but instead the fact that both of these passages are praising God for things that God has yet to do, in spite of the terrible situation that God's people currently inhabit. Around the time of Isaiah 12 God's people were in quite the predicament. Major powers in the Middle East were looming all around them, their best kings were dead and gone, and considering the fact that the promised land is located on the warpath between powerhouses such as Assyria and Egypt, it appeared to many as though faithfulness to God came second to attempting to secure good favor with one of the surrounding powerful nations.

By the time we get to Isaiah 65 things have only marginally improved for God's chosen people. They have joyfully returned from exile, but things are not as they thought they would be. In short, those things that they were supposed to praise God for in chapter 12 have yet to happen. King Cyrus is more obviously the people's savior than God, and God's people are struggling to regain even a semblance of the former days of glory under King David. They are largely defenseless and reliant on pagan powers for their continued existence. Despite these dark and confusing times though, the people are told to "be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating." God has promised redemption, and the Israelites are called to faithfully await that redemption.

Skipping ahead a few hundred years to our gospel reading, the Messiah has come, and yet things are still not as God has promised they will be. Not only does Israel remain in bondage while the countryside is littered with false Messiahs, Jesus doesn't seem to have good news for us today. The temple, the direct conduit to God, God's dwelling place on earth, and the literal center of the universe is going to be utterly destroyed. Not only that, but what seems to be the exact opposite of what God has promised is going to come about: war, not peace; famine and plagues' not security; and persecution and death for God's people, not flourishing and long life. It is true that it ends on a good note—God's going to protect our hair and our souls, but it still sounds far from the promises made to God's people in Isaiah.

I would like to put forward the idea though, that throughout this passage, despite its dark nature, we find hope and God's plan being moved forward towards the redemption of God's people. This is because we know the end of the story found in Revelation. We know that God will be returning, and that God will bring a new Jerusalem, one made of pure gold and fine gemstones, and one that notably lacks a temple. You see, the temple's destruction, while undeniably tragic, is necessary to signal a new age where God is no longer confined to Jerusalem, where the Holy Spirit is poured out on all believers.

The temple is no longer necessary because through Christ's incarnation, life, death and resurrection Christ has become both the temple, the conduit through which we can experience God, and the high priest who redeems God's people. Through the incarnation Jesus bridged the gap between God and humankind; through his life Jesus showed us how to be faithful disciples;

and through his death and resurrection Jesus demonstrated that even in the darkest of times God's redemptive plan is moving towards salvation.

The suffering of God's people and the martyrs that give their lives in service to Christ are also necessary, for we see again in Revelation that these saints are the first-fruits of the earth, given to atone for the rest of the earth's harvest. In the Old Testament, the first-fruits were an offering of the best and purest of the harvest given to God in order to sanctify the rest of the harvest and to thank God for God's provision. So, using the same imagery we find that those who sacrificed themselves for Christ are the first-fruits, taken by God in order to sanctify the remaining children of God.

So, while the message that Jesus gives us isn't fun, it is filled with hope for a brighter future, one where God's promises of old will be fulfilled. God will ensure peace and prosperity for God's people, and most importantly, God will remove the alienation that exists between God and humankind and dwell directly among God's people.

It is in this light then, that I think we should view today's passage from second Thessalonians. Those people that we read about being idle were seemingly sitting around waiting for God to return. While this may seem like a faithful response to God's promises, to quit your job and sit around waiting for the Lord, Paul points out that we have work to do. It is our job to sacrifice of ourselves, to give of ourselves as students, professors, parents, children and friends, or whatever vocations we fill. All of these roles come together communally to form the church, and as the body of Christ, Christ's representatives on earth, it is our role to become the first-fruits and work towards the redemption of the rest of creation as we are empowered by the Holy Spirit. In keeping with the Star Wars story from earlier, we are Jedi Knights who need to continue working for peace and justice, despite the seemingly overwhelming power of evil around us. Our job, however is unfortunately not accomplished with light sabers, but through praising God for God's future redemption, even when our experience seems to tell us that God's redemption is nowhere to be found, and faithfully working and sacrificing for the coming kingdom, the new Jerusalem. To be a part of this coming kingdom, we need to sacrifice everything, and faithfully praise God for what God is doing to bring about our salvation.

I would like to close then, with my favorite Biblical passage, which I think ties together today's lessons. It echoes God's promises in Isaiah, shows us what the promised salvation of our bodies and souls looks like in Luke and epitomizes what we are called to work toward by Paul. It is Revelation 21:3-5 which states "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See I am making all things new." That is the God we serve, and it is this future that we work towards.