

Sermon Proper 27

Year C

The Study of the “Last Things”

[RCL] Haggai 1:15b-2:9; Psalm 145:1-5, 17-21 or 98; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17; Luke 20:27-38

Each of today’s lessons, in its own way, points us toward the strange and wondrous world of eschatology; that is to say that they speak to our questions about the future and about our ultimate purpose, and they address our aspirations for the Church and for the world in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Eschatology is the study of the “Last Things.” Traditionally, theologians who discuss eschatology write about the topics of death, judgment, heaven, and hell. They try to answer questions like, “Does God have a plan for the world?” and “Does our life have any ultimate purpose or significance?”

Sometimes “mainstream” Christians, including Episcopalians, avoid eschatology out of concern that some people might misinterpret the darker passages in the Bible by focusing on their own deep-seated fears and speculations instead of the Gospel message of God’s mercy and reconciliation, questions about the Last Things address our most fundamental spiritual concerns for justice and seek to clarify our ultimate significance of as God’s sons and daughters. Furthermore, such questions about these topics express our highest and best hopes for the eternal life that God has promised to his people.

As Christians, we whole-heartedly affirm that the God who created the universe has a purpose and plan for the world in which we live. We also proclaim our faith that our individual and lives and our common life as the Body of Christ are part of God’s gracious design for creation.

The belief that God works in the world and in the lives of his children was an essential proclamation of the Old Testament prophets and of Christ’s preaching of the Kingdom of God. The Hebrew prophets, like many people today, were dismayed at the evil, corruption, and brokenness of the world around them.

The Old Testament lesson from Haggai offers a view of the prophet’s world. It was a bleak world in which God’s people felt dejected, found their homeland destroyed, and discovered that the Temple where the Lord’s glory had once shone was in ruins. It was a world that provided few reasons for hope.

This description of ancient Judah at the end of the exile could describe many downtrodden communities at any given period of history and perhaps many towns and cities today where the reasons for hope appear to be few and far-between. To such communities, the prophet Haggai speaks of God’s promise to restore what has fallen to the glory of his kingdom. The Lord’s message to them, and to his people today, is clear: “Take courage, all you people of the land... I am with you... My Spirit abides

among you; do not fear.” The prophet offers a word of hope and a vision of God’s restoration of his people to abundant prosperity and peace. The land once again will have provisions, and the glory of God once more will shine among those who trust in the Lord. Indeed, Haggai insists that the future condition of God’s people will surpass all its past triumphs: “The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts, and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts.”

Like so many visions in the Bible, this is an eschatological vision, a vision of a future full of hope. It is a view toward God’s ultimate purposes for his people. His purpose for them is to fill them with his own splendor and glory in a future restoration and final triumph. We can trust that such a vision is true because it is grounded in God and in God’s essential goodness and sovereignty.

Equally, a close reading of today’s Epistle lesson from the Second Letter to the Thessalonians also suggests an eschatological hope for Christians who may be in a bad way. Saint Paul’s original audience was a church community that felt under assault from outside forces that seemed directly opposed to the grace and love of God as they had experienced it. He warned them not to be shaken or overly worried by their problems and difficulties; rather, the Apostle urged them to remember the promises of God to vindicate his faithful people on the Last Day. Such promises are made in light of God’s purposes for us and for the world.

As we read Paul’s words to the Thessalonians we are reminded that God also chose us to be holy and to inherit the glory of his Son Jesus Christ, like he chose those early Christians. As people of faith, we can stand firm on the Gospel because God’s promises to us in Jesus Christ are certain, and we can take comfort because God’s plans for us are good: “Now may the Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.”

Of all the lessons, however, the portion of the Luke’s Gospel that we read today offers us a clear message about God’s plan for our future. On this particular occasion, several Sadducees questioned Jesus regarding levirate marriage, the practice of widows marrying their husband’s brother to carry on the family name and its results on the Last Day at the General Resurrection. Those who questioned Jesus did not believe in the hope that he offered to his disciples. It was an attempt to entrap him and discredit his teaching, but Jesus was not deterred. He explained that God’s promise for the age to come is a promise of transformation.

Rejecting the resurrection, as the Sadducees did, was to misunderstand something essential about who God is. God is the living God, and those who trust in him will become “like angels,” not concerned with the worries of the present, and they shall “children of God” and “children of the resurrection.”

God’s purpose is to make us like the Risen Christ, to make us like Jesus by means of our own resurrection to eternal life. Jesus grounded this hope, not in the problems of the present, but in the living God himself. Jesus reminds us that the Holy One, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the

God of the living who can give life even to those to who have died. The Sadducees were rebuffed because their idea of God’s greatness was too small.

The tremendous greatness of God and this promise of resurrection and future transformation form an essential part of our Christian faith. Day-in and day-out the Church proclaims that we believe in “God, the Father Almighty,” “the resurrection of the body,” and “everlasting life”.

We believe that despite our particular problems and burdens, God will convert our frequently inglorious present into a life of eternal significance filled with joy, peace, and an incorruptible glory—we will become like our risen Savior Jesus Christ. Such a transformation will not be the product of our human devising, nor will it be a reward for our own good works. Rather, it will be fruit of God’s love and grace at work in our lives to bring about God’s good purposes for us through the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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