

Twenty-third Sunday After Pentecost – 2022

Malachi 4:1-6

2 Thessalonians 3:1-13

Luke 21:5-36

Dour Christians aren't particularly attractive Christians. Oh, I don't doubt their faith. I don't doubt the basis upon which they place their gloomy attitude. I'm just rather convinced that such an attitude rarely inspires converts and, personally, it leaves me a bit cold. Do y'all know any dour Christians? Dour: relentlessly pessimistic, sullen or morose in outlook. It may be surprising to you that a pastor would give voice to the statement that is about to hit your eardrums but there *is* a fair amount of *bad news* in the Bible. To wit: "(It is) through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Jesus said: "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother... And a person's enemies will be those of his own household" (Matthew 10:34b-36). In today's Gospel reading, Jesus tells His disciples rather bluntly: "You will be hated by all for my name's sake" (Luke 21:17). If it is your inclination to be dour then you will have no shortage of fuel for your funky fire in the Scripture.

No one here is attempting to build empty-headed believers nor are we interested in sticking our heads in the sand to avoid reality. The world is indeed a broken place. Out there, wisdom is in short supply. Cultural nonsense is on the rise and the stewards of our institutions are often the ones leading the erosion of what they were tasked to preserve. Christians' eyes are to be wide open. But let these words sink deeply into your soul: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:4-7).

Don't get me wrong, if I were in a landing craft at Normandy during World War II then I wouldn't want Rodney Dangerfield with me spilling his jokes. Likewise, I don't want Chicken Little with me when the slightest storm cloud is on the Christian horizon. Us Christians have a job to do. We must interpret the times properly, prepare for our Lord's return **and** we must keep a happy heart, a joyful spirit, a confident and resolute mind that places our Lord's triumph above anything and everything. Can you do that? It's important that you do that. The Lord is going to return and He wants us prepared. He doesn't give the us the time but He stirs His church to perpetual watchfulness, eagerly anticipating the Day. It is possible, perhaps likely, that the world will get sicker and sicker. God's impending judgment cannot be ignored. It is certainly a serious topic. When things become chaotic that is when faith becomes vulnerable to panic, vulnerable to overreaction, vulnerable to a lack of trust in God's Word, God's authority, God's provision.

Ultimately, Satan wants to take you captive (Colossians 2:8). Vain philosophy, a brooding meaninglessness, and an overwrought, gloomy melancholy taking root in Christ's church are our very present enemies. Are we going to let these enemies rob us of our joy? I recently finished reading the original Pilgrim's Progress. I enjoyed the Postmodern Pilgrim's Progress so much that I decided that the original, written in 1678, would be worth my time. I wasn't disappointed. The Pilgrim is a man named Christian who endeavors to leave the City of Destruction (where all

of us live) and make his way to the Celestial City (heaven). Along the way Christian meets various people who represent the very real spiritual encounters we all have in this life. After reaching his goal in a glorious fashion, his wife, Christiana, begins her own pilgrimage. Christiana encounters a man with a muck-rake in his hand. Muck is synonymous with manure, dung, animal excrement. John Bunyan, the author, tells us that the man “could look no way but downwards, with a muck-rake in his hand.”

It is sadder, more remarkably accurate than it at first sounds. Bunyan continues: “There stood also one over his head, with a celestial crown in his hand, and proffered to give him that crown for his muck-rake; but the man did neither look up nor regard, but raked to himself” all the refuse on the floor. What’s the point? The point is that earthly things, when they dominate men’s minds, carry those men’s hearts away from God. Look around you. Are the eyes of your peers on the earth, on the things of this life, on the rise and fall of political realities, on the banalities which saturate the television or are the eyes of your peers on heaven, on the crown that awaits those who die in Christ, on the heavenly kingdom that is in our midst? Your Christian joy... is it rising or falling? Jesus is straightforward with us: “But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap” (Luke 21:34).

Joy! A Christian carries with him an eternal joy. We have been liberated from death. We have the love of God that elevates us above the muck of this world. You have a real and a very present freedom that no one could ever plunder. Joy! You have been knit into Christ’s church and you have known the bonds of brotherhood, sisterhood from people who have the light of Christ in their eyes. Like calves leaping from the stall in play, in an exhilarating expression of excitement, Christians take delight in their salvation. Delight; Truth and Beauty and Holiness are a cord of three strands which God weaves in your heart. Joy! The world says: embrace my vanity and you will be enriched. It’s a lie; a demonic deception. You will be tempted to give your genuine joy, the joy that is your birthright as a Christian for a bowl of worldly gruel. A muck-rack; the world wants to put it in your hand. Have you not had quite enough of raking the world’s manure?

Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and He won for you the crown of life (Hebrews 12:2). Wonder of wonders, you are His joy. Right now, He delights in preparing you for His return. He speaks His Gospel into your ear and your faith rejoices in His holy Word. All that He ever intended to do is being accomplished in you. Your mouth receives the body and blood of the crucified King. True God comes to make His abode with you that you might truly be prepared to receive Him who comes in the Name of the Lord. Our eyes are heavenward; we are strangers here; heaven is our home. A crown of righteousness – that is what you will wear. Christ’s righteousness is your very present possession; now. His glory is in this Holy House and we are saturated with what is good as we receive His Word and Sacrament. That is attractive! Christians who know who they are and what God gives are the very embodiment of evangelism.

There’s something unsettling about a dour Christian. I realize that some have reserved personas, introverted or shy. It’s not the same as being dour. No one is ever going to put Christ back in the tomb. He is risen; risen with healing in His wings. Joy to the world, our redemption is

drawing near. When all seems un-right in the world Jesus tells us to straighten up and raise our heads because our redemption is drawing near. That is exactly what we will do. “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31). The Kingdom of God is near. “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?” (Psalm 27:1). The Kingdom of God is near. There is in store for you a crown of righteousness, Christ’s perfect righteousness (2 Timothy 4:8). The Kingdom of God is near. That reality brings joy; to you, to me, to His church throughout the world. We are the elect; chosen, liberated and loved. Joy is the fruit of Christ’s Spirit in our believing heart. We will keep it and wait for His return.