

25 Pentecost  
November 19, 2023

In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit. Amen.

Sermon by Rev. Renee LiaBraaten

LAST DAYS

It's Q&A Time! Are you ready?

Our first question is a fill in the blank. What are some words that you use to describe God? God is\_\_\_\_\_.

Our second question:

What things come to mind when you hear the phrase, "The End Times?"

Well, my friends, here we are in the *last days* of the church year. Only one more Sunday left, and then a new church year will begin on the first Sunday in Advent.

On these last three Sundays of the church year, we hear the *last* three parables Jesus shared with his disciples before he was betrayed and crucified. Last week we heard the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids. Today we heard the Parable of the Talents. And next week, stay tuned for Jesus' final parable: The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats.

All of our lessons today make reference to the *last days*—the final judgement. And there are many Christians who view the utter devastation that is taking place in Gaza right now as a sign that we are in *the last days*—the End Times.

Whatever these days are, they are certainly unsettling, disturbing, and confusing. There is so much conflict, suffering and destruction taking place all around the world right now. Many of the foundational things that have always given us a sense of security in life, like democracy and decency and a healthy planet, seem to be teetering and in danger of collapse. There's a lot of tearing down going on, and very little building up. These are troubling times.

And so, we gather here on this Sabbath day to hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people. We have come to this holy place seeking to apply our hearts to wisdom...not the world's wisdom, but God's wisdom.

So...What do we hear the Spirit saying today? And how can what we hear help us to understand and faithfully respond to what is going on in the world around us?

From the Prophet Zephaniah, we heard some very harsh words. Let me read a bit of that passage to you again, but this time from The Message translation:

“On Judgment Day, I’ll search through every closet and alley in Jerusalem. I’ll find and punish those who are sitting it out, fat and lazy, amusing themselves and taking it easy; who think, ‘God doesn’t do anything, good or bad. God isn’t involved, so neither are we.’ But just wait.

Judgment Day is payday—my anger paid out:

a day of distress and anguish,  
 a day of catastrophic doom,  
 a day of darkness at noon,  
 a day of black storm clouds,  
 a day of bloodcurdling war cries,  
 as forts are assaulted,  
 as defenses are smashed.

I’ll make things so bad they won’t know what hit them.”

Yikes! This might explain why we don’t read the book of Zephaniah very often. This vengeful, punitive ruler is certainly not our predominant image of God, is it? This doesn’t sound like the loving, merciful, compassionate God that Jesus revealed to us. This is not the God we have to come to know and love and trust over the course of our lives. Today Zephaniah reminds us that this God—the Creator of the Universe and Lover of our Souls—can be provoked.

So, what was it that provoked this kind of rage and wrath in God?

Zephaniah tells us that the people God loved had become **complacent**—smug and self-satisfied. But the worst thing is that they had become **indifferent** toward God. God’s people had become **uninterested** in the ways of God, **unresponsive** to God’s love, **apathetic** to the needs of others, **unconcerned** and **unmoved** by the oppression and suffering perpetuated by the **unjust systems** they were participating in. Does this sound familiar?

Zephaniah warns us, “Never think for a minute that God doesn’t care about how you live. People may become indifferent toward God, but God is never indifferent toward people or the choices they make.”

God is passionate about justice and righteousness, and, as God’s people, we are called to be passionate about these things too. I know that it often seems like our efforts don’t make much difference, but to do nothing is simply not an option for us. Zephaniah reminds us that “though the wrong seems oft so strong, **God is the ruler yet.**” No matter how discouraging things appear, we can’t give up. As Martin Luther King often said, ***“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”*** Never doubt that God is at work in the midst of all things, and never forget that God does this work through people. Ordinary people like you and me.

Next, in Psalm 90, we heard that from the very first day to the last day (whenever that is), the one thing that remains constant is God. And you and I, well we are here today, gone tomorrow—like the grass. In the big scheme of things, we are a blip. The Psalmist writes, ***“The span of our life is seventy years, perhaps in strength even eighty...they pass away quickly and we are gone.”***

Now, I may have been a little over sensitive to these words, since I turned 70 this year. But, what I hear the Spirit saying to those of us 70 and older, is that these days may be **OUR last days!** So, if there is anything we feel God is calling us to do, we better get on with it!. This is not the time to settle back and “enjoy our retirement.” These are troubling times, and the Lord has need of us.

Next, we heard the Spirit speak to us through Paul’s words to the Thessalonians. But I think that this is the best thing we heard today, so I want to save it for last, ok?

Let’s jump to the Gospel Lesson where we heard Jesus’ very familiar Parable of the Talents. This parable has been used from generation to generation as the basis of thousands upon thousands of stewardship sermons. In these sermons, we have been encouraged, year after year, to give generously of our time, talent and treasure to the work of God which is being carried out through our churches. And these sermons have been very effective. I know this for a fact. Because I’ve been leading capital campaigns in churches around the country for the last 25 years, and the people of God are incredibly generous stewards of the gifts they’ve been given. I’ve seen that same generosity here at St. Cyprians. And I have witnessed firsthand all the joy that is generated by this outpouring of time, talent and treasure!

However, hearing the traditional interpretation of this parable, over and over again, makes it difficult to hear the deeper things the Spirit might be saying to us through this parable. So let’s listen to the parable again from The Message translation:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a man going off on an extended trip. He called his servants together and delegated responsibilities. To one he gave five thousand dollars, to another two thousand, to a third one thousand, depending on their abilities. Then he left. Right off, the first servant went to work and doubled his master’s investment. The second did the same. But the man with the single thousand dug a hole and carefully buried his master’s money.

After a long absence, the master of those three servants came back and settled up with them. The one given five thousand dollars showed him how he had doubled his investment. His master commended him: ‘Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner.’ Same thing with the second servant.

But the servant given one thousand dollars said, ‘Master, I know you have high standards and hate careless ways, that you demand the best and make no allowances for error. I was afraid I might disappoint you, so I found a good hiding place and secured your money. Here it is, safe and sound down to the last cent.’

The master was furious. ‘That’s a terrible way to live! It’s criminal to live cautiously like that! If you knew I was after the best, why did you do less than the least? The least you could have done would have been to invest the sum with the bankers, where at least I would have gotten a little interest. Take the thousand and give it to the one who risked the most. And get rid of this “play-it-safe” who won’t go out on a limb. Throw him out into utter darkness.’”

Woah! What a harsh, horrible ending! In order to make any sense of this, we have to take a closer look at the context.

Jesus was in the midst of his last days when he shared this parable with his disciples. He was on his way to a violent, harsh, horrible death. His time with his disciples was short. Soon he would be entrusting them with a priceless treasure—his message of God’s love and forgiveness and **restorative** justice. This message was not going to go over well with the masters of this world, whose power and position and dominance depends on systems based in **retributive** justice.

Jesus knew that things were about to get very frightening for these disciples whom he loved. But they were all he had, and he needed them to be brave and bold and confident and courageous. This treasure—this message—was about to cost Jesus his life. And carrying this treasure—this message—forward into the world was going to be very costly for his disciples.

It would be so tempting for them to simply go underground—to hide this light under a bushel, to keep it to themselves, and simply go back to fishing. I mean, there’s nothing wrong with fishing, right? But to bury this treasure—to keep this message to themselves—to hide this light would cast the entire world into utter darkness.

This battle—this conflict—between the world’s wisdom and God’s wisdom, between revenge and reconciliation, between retribution and restoration is still going on today, isn’t it?

Hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s people: This is no time for complacency. This is no time for playing it safe. The stakes are too high.

- We need to be bold and brave and confident and courageous.
- This is our time to risk going out on a limb and to live our lives in ways that bear witness to the treasure that we carry in these earthen vessels.
- We are being called to invest ourselves in ushering in God’s kingdom wherever we can.
- We need to put our whole selves in.
- We can’t sit idly by while God’s creation is being destroyed on so many levels.

If being a follower of Jesus isn’t costing us anything, it may be that we are not following Jesus.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor and professor who lived in Germany during the horrors of the Nazi regime, wrote in his book, **The Cost of Discipleship**: “*The sin of respectable people is running from responsibility.*” Bonhoeffer’s sense of responsibility led him to join the Resistance and help plan an assassination attempt on Hitler’s life. His decision to answer God’s call to get involved in God’s passion for justice and righteousness cost Bonhoeffer his life.

And as I was working on this sermon, the haunting words of Father Daniel Berrigan, the Jesuit priest and anti-war activist kept coming to mind: “If you want to follow Jesus, you better look good on wood.”

In his second to last parable, Jesus warns us that the outcome of playing it safe, of not caring, not loving passionately, not investing ourselves—is something like being banished to utter darkness. It snuffs out our light and prevents us from experiencing the joy God intends for us. It turns out that the greatest risk is not to risk anything.

Finally, Paul’s words to the Thessalonians. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s people: “But you, **beloved**, are not in darkness...for you are all children of light and children of the day; Therefore, encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.”

**Beloved. Beloved is where we begin, and beloved is where we end.** And no matter how troubling these times may be, nothing can take away our identity as God’s beloved. Nothing can separate us from God’s love for us. This is the message—this is the treasure—that has been entrusted to us. In God’s kingdom, ALL people are beloved.

Even when we are like the foolish bridesmaids and don’t get our act together and plan for every eventuality, we are **beloved**. And even when we are like the cautious servant and are so afraid of failure that we don’t use the gifts we’ve been given to their full potential, we are **beloved**.

And, knowing that we are beloved, and seeing others as beloved, changes everything! Just think...if those five wise bridesmaids had seen the five foolish bridesmaids as beloved, they would have taken the risk and shared their oil. Then, they all could have gone into the wedding banquet.

Or, if those two brave, bold, high achieving servants had seen the fearful, cautious, timid servant as beloved, they would have gotten involved. They would have helped him see the generosity of their master, shared their investing skills, and encouraged him--given him the courage—to trust the master and invest the talent he’d been given. And that horrible ending could have become a happy one.

Whatever these days are that we are in, may we spend these days **encouraging and building up** those around us by seeing them and treating them as beloved, so that **all** might enter into the joy of the Master. No one left behind.

**“Beloved.”** May this be the **last** word we remember on these *last days* of the church year and on our last day. **“Beloved.”** Amen.