

26th Sunday after Pentecost
"What is your vision of the future?"
Luke 21:5-19
11/17/13

What do you notice about these predictions about the future?

"This 'telephone' has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us." -- Western Union internal memo, 1876.

"Everything that can be invented has been invented." -- Charles H. Duell, Commissioner, U.S. Office of Patents, 1899.

"I think there is a world market for maybe five computers." -- Thomas Watson, chairman of IBM, 1943

"We don't like their sound, and guitar music is on the way out." -- Decca Recording Co. rejecting the Beatles, 1962.

As you can see, what a person believes about the future, has a big influence on what they believe about today.

There are a lot of different ideas out there, about what is going to happen to this world. At one extreme, there are people who buy into all kinds of wild predictions about the future. Millions of books are sold which claim to know exactly when the world is going to end, or which war or earthquake is the sign we should pay attention to. Horoscopes, astrology, and other new age religions also claim to have the answers. Even some TV preachers point to the Bible and claim to find specific predictions about the future.

Now, I don't know how many people actually believe that stuff, but I think the reason some people pay attention, and buy those books, and listen to those TV preachers is because their vision of the future is blank. They don't know what they believe.

And in their search for meaning in this life, they will fill in that blank, with just about anything. Whatever the latest book is, whatever the latest trend is... that's what they'll follow.

Now, at the other extreme there are some people who are not very interested in the future, because they are feeling pretty comfortable with their lives.

They don't operate out of a fear about the future because life has been treating them pretty well so far. In fact, life has been so good, that they have begun to take many things for granted. And as long as things keep going well, they really don't see a need for God in their life.

They haven't come face to face with some of the big events in life like the birth of a child, a tragic illness, or the death of a loved one the kind of events that may you take a larger view of life and make you re-evaluate where you fit in the grand scheme of things.

The future, for these folks, is still too far in the distance which makes their vision of the future blurry.

They may entertain various ideas about the future, but frankly their present life is so comfortable, that they don't feel compelled or moved to put their faith in anything.

Their creed is pretty simple.

"If you live a basically good life, and you're a basically good person, you will be rewarded in the life to come."

Now I lay out these two popular visions of the future so that you can see the contrast we find in our Scripture passages for this morning. The vision of the future that the Bible offers us is quite different. There is nothing blank or blurry about it.

Malachi, chapter 4, reminds us that in the end, there will be justice.

Those who spent their lives doing evil will pay the price.
But those whose hearts are turned toward God,
will receive healing.

Now, that's a hopeful message for all those who have suffered at the hands of evil in this world. The Bible assures us that God is a God of justice.

I must say though, it's amazing to me, how many people I've met, who reject this Biblical vision of the future.

They tell me that they have a hard time with the word "judgment."

They have a hard time believing in a hell, where evil is punished.

That somehow God's mercy can exist without God's justice.

They think that to be "compassionate" God would surely welcome all people into heaven... because after all, isn't everyone basically good at heart?

Now, that may sound okay in the abstract, but the problem with that kind of thinking is that it's not Biblical.

It's not Biblical because the Bible tells us that all people are captive to sin.

To believe in the God of the Bible is to believe in a God of mercy and justice. and when we acknowledge our sin, when we realize how much we need a Savior, that's when God sets us free.

As Malachi reminds us, those whose hearts are turned toward God, will receive healing, the redemption that Jesus so freely gives.

Our Second reading from Thessalonians, also has something to say about the future. Here, Paul reminds us that while we are to be prepared for Jesus' return, we are not to withdraw from this life.

The problem was, that some of the people in Thessalonica, had quit working and were living in idleness. They had given up on this life.

And so Paul tells them that God's vision of the future, should not encourage us to pull away from this world, but instead to become more deeply engaged in it. We are to be prepared for Jesus' return, while each day living and working to the glory of God.

Finally, we have Jesus' own words about the future in today's Gospel reading.

First of all, he warns us to beware, and not be led astray by false gods, and false predictions about the end of the world.

Second, Jesus tells us that there will be many signs of the end, but the end will not follow immediately. In other words, no one will know the day or the hour.

And third, Jesus tells us that Christians are likely to face a time of persecution or suffering for the sake of their faith. This persecution, Jesus says, "will be an opportunity to testify" a chance to share our faith, with those who have no hope.

And the best news of all, is that God will give us the words to say, and protect us from harm. There is nothing to fear, Jesus proclaims: "Not a hair on your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."¹

¹ Luke 21:18-19

I'd like to close by sharing two brief illustrations, illustrations that demonstrate the truth of the statement: "what you believe about the future, makes a difference in what you believe about today."

The first illustration is simply what I have witnessed in observing families who have just lost a loved one.

I've seen basically two kinds of grief: the grief of those who have hope and the grief of those who are without hope. Over the years, I have seen both kinds of grief, and there is nothing like the cry of a person who has no hope. When I was serving as a student chaplain in Minnesota, I came to the room of a woman who had just lost her mother.

And what I remember most is the absolute desperation the emptiness and fear in her crying. It was a grief that was inconsolable.

I learned later, that this woman was not a Christian. She was without hope and her vision of the future, certainly had a great impact on her life in the present.

The second illustration of this truth is a story about a little boy whose mother had recently died. His father, while carrying the load of his own grief, was trying to do his best to help his son cope with the loss of his mother.

So one day, the father scheduled a picnic for the two of them. The little boy had never been on a picnic. He was excited—so excited that he couldn't sleep.

Soon there was the patter of little feet down the hall to where his father was sleeping. He shook his Dad, who normally, would have been pretty grumpy to be awakened in the middle of the night except that he saw the expression on his son's face.

The little boy said, "Oh, Daddy, tomorrow's going to be so wonderful. I just can't sleep I'm so excited."

The father laughed and said, "Son, it won't be wonderful if we don't get some sleep. Now you go back to your bedroom and try to sleep."

Well, it wasn't long before the same ritual was repeated. The father was already sleeping soundly, when the boy placed an excited hand on his shoulder. "What do you want to do now?" his father asked.

"Daddy, said the boy, "I just want to thank you for tomorrow."
Just like that little boy, our future is in our Father's hands.
We don't need to fear tomorrow, because God is already there.
So, let us, each look to the future, with eyes of faith. Amen.