

*The Lessons Appointed for Use on the*  
**Sunday closest to November 16**



**Proper 28**  
**Year C**  
**RCL**

Isaiah 65:17-25

Canticle 9

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19

**The Collect**

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

**Isaiah 65:17-25**

For I am about to create new heavens  
and a new earth;

the former things shall not be remembered  
or come to mind.

But be glad and rejoice forever  
in what I am creating;

for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,  
and its people as a delight.

I will rejoice in Jerusalem,  
and delight in my people;

no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,  
or the cry of distress.

No more shall there be in it

an infant that lives but a few days,

or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;

for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a  
youth,

and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered  
accursed.

They shall build houses and inhabit them;

they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

They shall not build and another inhabit;

they shall not plant and another eat;

for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,

and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.  
They shall not labor in vain,  
or bear children for calamity;  
for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD –  
and their descendants as well.  
Before they call I will answer,  
while they are yet speaking I will hear.  
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,  
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;  
but the serpent – its food shall be dust!  
They shall not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.

**Canticle 9 Page 86, BCP**

**The First Song of Isaiah *Ecce Deus***

***Isaiah 12:2-6***

Surely, it is God who saves me;

I will trust in him and not be afraid.

For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense,  
and he will be my Savior.

Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing  
from the springs of salvation.

And on that day you shall say,

Give thanks to the Lord and call upon his Name;

Make his deeds known among the peoples;

see that they remember that his Name is exalted.

Sing the praises of the Lord, for he has done great things,  
and this is known in all the world.

Cry aloud, inhabitants of Zion, ring out your joy,

for the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit:  
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.

## **Luke 21:5-19**

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” And he said, “Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them.

“When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.” Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs

from heaven.

“But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

## SERMON

We talked last Sunday about the Presbytery's desire that we begin a process to envision what our future will look like. This week, when I looked at the text for this Sunday and absolutely nothing came to me I looked to older sermons for inspiration. The Revised Common Lectionary divides the Scriptures up into three cycles, year A, B and C. This is year C, so I looked back to a sermon I preached to you on this Sunday three years ago. Want to know what the lead sentence was? It was, "We talked last Sunday about the Presbytery's desire that we begin a process to envision what our future will look like." Same lead sentence as last week. On the one hand, that's pretty discouraging. It's three years later and we're still talking about it. On the other hand, that's encouraging because it means we're giving it serious thought and waiting upon the Lord to instruct us what the future shall be.

On the one hand, that should be a simple question with a straightforward answer. On the other hand, we get so dis-

tracted and overwhelmed by worries about the scary future that we forget we don't live in the future. We live now. In fact, we spend so much time worrying about the future that we don't give enough thought about the present.

When Jesus' disciples asked Him about the future:

“Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?”

Jesus gave them a long and scary answer:

“Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them.

“When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.” Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.”

That sounds pretty much like what we are experiencing now. The Middle East can't decide on anything. Iran is trying to build a nuclear bomb. Israel already has a nuclear bomb.



Typhoon Hiyan which struck the Philippines was one of the strongest storms ever recorded and killed thousands. An earthquake in Thailand in 2004 killed over 230,000 people in fourteen countries. The very climate is changing. It's easy to conclude that the reason we have trouble envisioning our future is because we don't have one, but I'd ask, "When was it ever not so?" Those looking for proof of the end are exercising myopic vision. These things have always happened and if you think it's scary now remember that seventy years ago Russia suffered over 20 MILLION casualties in World War II. In fact, World War II was the deadliest military conflict in history. Over 60 MILLION people died. That's 2.5% of the entire world's population and THAT friends and neighbors, is what scary is all about!<sup>1</sup>

If we can keep our wits about us and confess that worrying about the future won't do the future, or us, any good whatsoever then we might be able to focus on what we are supposed to do about the present, because we have things to

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia

do in the present, church, and it's not just about seeing that the grass is cut.

On the one hand, when we focus, as we did last Sunday, on the difficulties our churches experience in making themselves relevant to the current time, it's easy to become alarmed about the future of our treasured worship forms. On the other hand, if we refocus our attention from the undeniable challenges our **churches** face to the certainty that God goes with **us**, the saints of the church, to the very end of the age we might see things differently. Recognizing that God is with you always is the way of hope.

Of all the world's religions, I think Christianity is the most hopeful because it is based upon the assurance that our very being is in the hands of a God who loves us. At dinner last Sunday, I was watching Ryan cradle Vivanie so gently in his arms as she slept that I said, "I know my mother and father cradled me in that way, even though I don't have any memory of it. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could remem-

ber the loving care our parents extended to us as infants?” Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could hold ever in mind the loving embrace of God, which attends our every breath? How do we respond to such love? On the one hand, the church building is the most visible sign of our presence within the community and goodness knows there are enough jobs within the church to keep everyone busy, so we focus a lot of attention on property maintenance. On the other hand, the Great Commission outlines our work as Christians and has nothing to say about property maintenance.

<sup>19</sup> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”<sup>2</sup>

The maintenance of the church property isn’t the **work** of a Christian. It is the **response** of a Christian to the loving embrace of God. When we confuse the two, we do a disservice to both.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 28:19-20 (New International Version)

Perhaps the most unique challenge we face today is that it is not very challenging to be a church member in America. In America the police are not going to break in here and haul you off for your faith. The rebel alliance is not going to lob mortars at us during services in America. The Sharia courts are not going to hand down death sentences for spreading Christianity in America. You're not going to lose your job for being a church member in America. These things happen all over the world, but they do not happen in America.

Because being a church member in America is not very challenging, it is pretty easy to become complacent about it, and we have. We have embraced what Archbishop Dolan described as a sanitized, feel-good, boutique, therapeutic spirituality, that makes no demands, calls for no sacrifice, asks for no conversion, entails no battle against sin, but only soothes and affirms. On the one hand, embracing such an unchallenging understanding offers so little meat to chew upon that we go away hungry. On the other hand, with the true work of

a Christian so well hidden, we tend to devote the energy we could use to pursue the relationship with God that being Christian means into things like church maintenance. It is not the church building which saves you, Church. It is God who saves you, as we read in the Call to Worship today:

Surely, it is God who saves me;

I will trust in him and not be afraid.

For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense,  
and he will be my Savior.

Bottom line: we have built beautiful restaurants with empty menus. Is it any surprise that those outside the church see us much as the first Jews returning to Jerusalem from Babylon saw Jerusalem?

Thinking on these matters, I tried to imagine myself among that first group returning to Jerusalem from Babylon. So, here I am, mentally clothed in the latest Babylonian fashion on my richly decorated camel and I'm about to cross over the last hill between Babylon and Jerusalem. I've been on the road for months. I've endured blazing days and freezing nights and all so that I could finally see fabled Jerusalem, the

home of my fathers, God's footstool, the center of the world. At last, all the stories I heard in Babylon about Jerusalem are about to come to life before my eyes. I'm so excited I can hardly stand it. As my camel lifts me over that last hill, and Jerusalem is arrayed before me, what I see in place of legendary Jerusalem is a town laid flat, a Temple burnt to the ground, a few illiterate farmers scraping out a subsistence living along with goat herders and shepherds.

“For this I left Babylon?” I think. “I was expecting maybe an inn where we could sleep. Or a bite of food, maybe? This is it? This is Jerusalem? Oy! I thought it would be a lot classier.”

I wonder if contemporary people see the contemporary church as the returning Jews saw Jerusalem. Do they see a church laid flat, a hopeless mess? And if they do, can they come to see it as their challenge, their task to correct? I'd say the answer is “No” unless that correction begins from within.

What, then, should be done as we “begin a process to en-

vision what our future will look like”? The first thing I would suggest is that we abandon anxiety about what the future may be in favor of commitment to that which we are called to do now. The world is filled with suffering. We are called to address it. Each Sunday, we confess the reality of sin not only in our individual lives but also in common life. Christians are called upon to speak to it. You may remember Rev. Fred Craddock’s story about arriving in a new town to preach and seeing the waitress at a diner treat an African-American customer with contempt. He didn’t speak up, for fear of making things uncomfortable for his hosts who were dining with him. As they left, though, Fred stopped and cocked his head. When his hosts asked him what he was doing, he confessed that he just heard a cock crow. Christians are called to confront sin in common life.

Secondly, the Great Commission instructs us to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach-

ing them to obey everything I have commanded you.” You can’t do that if your speech and your actions betray you as bigoted or hate-filled. When you speak, speak as if you are speaking the very words of God. Let no one find in your speech hatred or intolerance or approval of cruelty, and let the world see that your actions follow your word.

The third thing I would suggest is that the maintenance of the church building and the continuance of its fellowship aspects are expressions of your gratitude for the love extended to you. We need to acknowledge that. It is your gratitude which builds the church building. Your response to His word, to His Grace, to His Son is the energy which will build the church. Heed it, Church. Heed the works of God within you, for He knew you from your mother’s womb.

Finally, on the one hand, these services are the way we worship and praise God for his mercy to us, these buildings are the place where we do it, and we love both. On the other hand, our worship forms, our beloved hymns and our trea-



sured church building are not the same as the awareness of God-with-us every moment which is the soul of the Christian life. Every family serves a different Thanksgiving feast, but all are, nevertheless, thankful.

The light of this church will shine forth from here in the later times more brightly than in the former. I know that, church. The glory of the Lord will be proclaimed here with more clarity in later times than in the former. The hand of this church will reach out to the poor, the disadvantaged, the humble and the meek in greater ways in the later times than in the former, and we shall make a statement of God's sovereignty starting here that will not be forgotten for all time for God is with us, even to the end of the Age.

AMEN

*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

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