

Day of reckoning

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on November 15, 2009, the Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost.

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.
Hebrews 10:23

When I think of how long we have lived with issues of religious terrorism, an uncertain economy and health care reform, many of the same issues are of continuing concern today. In the Letter to the Hebrews, we find a message of hope and encouragement in which the author writes: *Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.* This was written while Christians were under terrible persecution when it would have been understandable for them to lose hope. They had to be strong in their convictions to be willing to endure persecution and suffer death. They were willing to give up their lives for what they believed because they were more concerned with conviction than self-preservation. After their example we must not give into fear nor lose hope. We must hold fast to what we have been promised.

If you look at the children's questions addressed to God posted in the parish hall, you see that their questions are the same as you and I have been asking all our lives. God: "Why do you allow awful things to happen to good people?" God: "Why won't you stop people from getting sick?" "Do you still love people if they sin? I don't know about you, but I don't believe that is any easy answer to why there is sickness and suffering. At the same time, nothing has ever deterred me from believing in a loving and benevolent God who wants what is right and good for us and I am certain that God still loves us when we sin.

I don't believe in a malevolent God who sends evil upon us. There are those who may believe that, but I don't. I believe that much of evil and suffering is a consequence of our own free will. That which is beyond human cause or control remains a mystery. We are never promised that we will be protected from harm. We are promised that no evil power will overcome us. Don't try to tell me that there is a reason for everything. I have no need for neat and tidy answers like that. I can live with misfortune, disease and natural disaster and not lose my faith in God. I can continue to believe in God's goodness when things go wrong. I don't expect God to keep me from misfortune; that is all part of reality. When I fall flat on my face, I know that God still loves me.

When we put everything into perspective, we are all here on an interim basis. Permanency is an illusion. Life is, in fact, the great meantime between birth and death making what we do in that time is essential. I see life as an opportunity and an adventure in which we fallible beings work with imperfect structures in God's good world.

You may have heard it said that Christians are in the world, but not of it. That means that we affirm the reality of the real world while drawing our resources and direction from God. We press on as the world presses in. Just as a boat in the water is good, but water inside the boat is not, so the church out in the world is good, but too much of the world in the church is not. When we are awash with the secular world, the spiritual world begins to founder.

In today's gospel narrative in Mark we read about the end times, not a popular subject. Because we are finite and mortal beings with a beginning and an end, we experience losses during our sojourn in this world. Whether it is the loss of a parent, a job, or a marriage, it is all part of living. While I have never believed that God causes misfortune, disease and natural disasters, I

also believe that we can't expect God to bail us out or make everything go right for us. It is when we can't make sense out of what is happening that we remain close to the heart of God. God knows our losses and grieves with us and enables us to move on and begin anew. Our salvation is in our redemption and welcome in the household of God.

In the great meanwhile of this earthly life, Christ is our true Savior. He tells us that there will be false messiahs trying to convince us when and how everything will be brought to an end. Such things are not for us to know. Our job is to live in a state of readiness and remain alert. Jesus warns against false prophets who claim personal authority and power they don't have. These phony prophets assume far too much over the lives of others. The result is that their followers are exploited by controlling personalities who claim to be acting in God's name when all they are really doing is exerting power and control. Jesus warns us not to be led astray by religious leaders who make such claims.

There are many crises that could be interpreted today as signs of the end of the world: international strife, atrocities committed in the name of religion, cities in chaos, rampant crime, dishonesty in the financial world, children living with abuse and exploitation and families split by unfaithfulness and promiscuity. It would certainly seem that the time is ripe for God to bring on the end, but that time is not ours to know, whether it is predicted in the Mayan calendar in the year 2012 or at any other time.

The end time, if and when it comes, may not be as cataclysmic as anticipated. It may be just another day when nothing much is happening. People will get up in the morning and go about their routine business with no idea that anything is different or out of the ordinary. Only when we stand before God "from whom no secrets are hid" will we realize it. When that time comes, we will no longer be able to rationalize, make excuses or put things off. We will be confronted with who we are and how we lived our lives. By God's standards everything will be turned around. The first will be last and the last will be first. There will be no place for personal ambition or selfish desire. What we thought was necessary will be unimportant and what we thought to be of value will be irrelevant. What was once acceptable will no longer be tolerated. Racism, homophobia, and sexism will give way to the inclusion and equality of those who have been marginalized. We won't be able to buy our way out. Not a cry will be heard, nor a drop of blood be shed. All will be brought to bear in God's own way and in God's own time.

There is no timetable for Christ's return. Our job is to live in a state of readiness and be able to recognize him in our midst. Those fixated on their own concerns will have the most difficult time. They won't be able to hear if they're not listening; they won't be able to see if they're not looking.

Too often we think we know what is best for ourselves when we really don't know. We can only set the conditions expected of us and God does the rest. In a world of contradictions of affluence and deprivation, where some seek gratification while others only know suffering, we must focus on the things of the spirit, ready to meet God face to face not as a stranger, but as one whom we've known all along.