

Devotions for the 23rd Week after Pentecost – November 9-13

Monday of Pentecost 23 – Prayer of the Week

Lord God, heavenly Father, send forth Your Son to lead home His bride, the Church, that with all the company of the redeemed we may finally enter into His eternal wedding feast; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.



Are you excited for heaven? My conversations with Christians have, over the years, suggested that many of us have the sort of attitude about heaven as the young man in the pew in the picture (leaning his head on his hand, looking bored). They know they are supposed to go and are supposed to like it, but they are having a hard

time coming up with much enthusiasm.

I think some of that is due to the image we have of heaven as some eternal church service. Do not get me wrong. I like going to church. But I would not be excited about an eternity of going to church either. Have we allowed people to think that heaven is boring?

Notice that the prayer compares the last day to an eternal wedding feast. I am not sure where the idea came from that heaven is an eternal worship service. I think it may have originated in John's book of Revelation and the depiction of the people of God eternally praising God (Rev. 7 and 14.) The far more common depiction of heaven, however, is as a party. Jesus tells numerous party parables (e.g. Luke 15). Heaven is going to be a good time. It may not be the way Hollywood defines a good time, but the folks who are there will be having a great party. Even John's depiction of the multitudes standing before the throne of God with palm branches in hand looks more like a rock concert than a church service to me.

We have come to the final weeks of the Church year and the readings for the next week will focus our attention on what is to come. What are you expecting? That is a good question to ask yourself in these days. That question might be sharpened by all that is going around us. The one who appears on that day is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, just to grab a few of His names. Our world right now could use some healthy direction, a good shot of truth telling, and the Corona virus has reminded us how fragile our grasp on life really is. Spend a few minutes this day asking yourself what you are expecting. Read a little of the Gospels. He is coming.

Tuesday of Pentecost 23 – Amos 5:18-24

¹⁸ Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD!

Why would you have the day of the LORD?

It is darkness, and not light,

¹⁹ as if a man fled from a lion,

and a bear met him,

or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall,

and a serpent bit him.

²⁰ Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light,

and gloom with no brightness in it?

²¹ “I hate, I despise your feasts,

and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

²² Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,

I will not accept them;

and the peace offerings of your fattened animals,

I will not look upon them.

²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs;

to the melody of your harps I will not listen.

²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters,

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

I recall the discussions in my childhood parish over worship. The 1941 hymnal (TLH) was being replaced by the 1981 hymnal (LW.) This issue of a new hymnal had become a rhetorical stand-in for other issues which revolved around the still-simmering synodical controversies of the prior decade. On the parish level, it played out with venom. Harsh words were spoken on all sides. Some of it was simply silly. One woman had to be reminded in a voters meeting, after tearfully pleading that her children be taught about Jesus in the original language, that neither Jesus nor Luther had in fact worshiped out of TLH or spoke King James English. Perhaps we should all learn the Bible in Greek and Hebrew. Some of it was frightening. Stories are told of churches having raucous voters' meetings over this issue, with one party bringing in absentee ballots to win the result they had sought, and then coming in late at night to remove the now-banned books off the racks. They were restored after the next voters' meeting.

What must God have thought?

Amos spoke to the worshipping community of Israel's north in the 8th Century BC. Their rituals were ever so correct and beautiful, but their hearts were closed to the Lord's message of mercy, love, justice, and forgiveness. They piously prayed that God would visit His people. In this passage Amos turns their words against them. They really did not want God to come. His

judgment would be inescapable for them, like a man who flees a lion only to run into a bear. God has no patience for their finely wrought worship, their musically accurate chorales, their beautifully played pipe organs, or the soulful bridge in their praise song when their hearts were far from Him.

God is not so concerned with the look and sound of our worship; He is after the heart that worships. Amos saw people attending to worship but not to the needs of their fellow human beings, the widows, orphans, and resident aliens for whom God had commanded them specifically to care. Their callousness gave evidence of a problem which no worshipful rectitude could solve. Amos utters his own prayer: Let Justice roll down like a river. It is easy enough to pray that prayer when we imagine God's justice visiting another. But what about when that flood overwhelms my life with my petty selfishness and self-wrought ways? Amos was pleading with his people to repent. If 2020 has a message for us, this could be it: time to repent.

Wednesday of Pentecost 23 – Psalm 70

¹ Make haste, O God, to deliver me!

O LORD, make haste to help me!

² Let them be put to shame and confusion
who seek my life!

Let them be turned back and brought to dishonor
who delight in my hurt!

³ Let them turn back because of their shame
who say, "Aha, Aha!"

⁴ May all who seek you
rejoice and be glad in you!

May those who love your salvation
say evermore, "God is great!"

⁵ But I am poor and needy;
hasten to me, O God!

You are my help and my deliverer;
O LORD, do not delay!

She always sat in the third pew back, one of those women who had aged well with twinkling eyes and a warm smile. Most congregations have at least one or two of these women and I praise God for them. She was there every week, and in every Bible study. Church was much of her life. Her income was not merely limited, it was constricted. Her husband had left her. Her children were far away. There were no silent pauses in Bible study. She would fill every moment with something. I think that was because her life was very silent at other times. It was just her

and her cat. She had friends, and they were fiercely loyal to one another, but Church was her other home.

I cannot pray this prayer of David without thinking of her. "I am poor and needy," David prayed. She was poor and needy, and a bit of a simple soul, but also delightful and faithful and kind. David continues, "You are my help and deliverer." He prays that those who seek to do him harm be put to shame and confusion.

I answer the phone these days and half the time it seems to be a robo-call pushing one scam or another. Lately they tell me that my car's warranty is about to expire. Do they know that my car is nearly 20 years old and its warranty has long since been composted? No, they do not care. The click of my immediate hang-up does not bother them either. They are fishing for someone like my old friend, a vulnerable person who might be shamed or confused into listening. They cast their net widely with their computer-generated phone calls and would catch one in a thousand or ten thousand. It is enough for them to line their pockets at the expense of the vulnerable.

"Let them be turned back!" begs David. I join him. Let them be turned back who say "Aha, Aha!" My friend rejoiced and was glad in the simplicity of her life. She always said, "God is good to me." I have much to learn from her about patience and strength. Do you know a vulnerable person who has been even more isolated in these days of pandemic? Give them a call today. Just talk to them a little bit. But also tell them to call you back before they respond to one of these rapacious calls. Be the instrument through which God turns back the schemes of those who seek after the livelihoods of God's precious people.

Thursday of Pentecost 23 – I Thessalonians 4:13-18

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁵ For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

My parents are both gone. They are buried in a country church cemetery in rural Iowa, next to dad's parents and siblings. I live thousands of miles away and cannot get to their grave very often. A dear friend who lives close by, happens to be a member of a nearby parish. He puts

flowers on their graves for us and for himself. My folks were both good to him when he was young.

Paul wants us to be informed so we do not grieve like others. Sometimes, I think, people have imagined that this means Christians are not supposed to grieve at all. But that is not what Paul says. He urges us not to grieve like those who have no hope. We still grieve, but we grieve in hope. For Paul that word “hope” was stronger than it is for us. Often when we use the word “hope” we mean something which is unlikely to happen. A better translation might be “expectation.” We have laid our loved ones in a grave with an expectation which Paul articulates for us in the rest of these verses. We expect the Lord will descend with a commanding shout, amplified by arch-angelic shouts and the blast of a trumpet. That cry will not be for you and me but for those, like my parents, who lie in graves. And they shall rise from death in new life. Together, we will always be with the Lord. Their death, all death, will be undone.

That is what we expect, what we count on happening. And, as a result, our grief is tempered. We still grieve. I want to go to that grave and stand there for a moment, just to feel the absence of my parents. I hope my friend can come with me for a shared grief is lighter for the sharing. But my grieving is tempered by hope. The smiles, love, and laughter I miss because my parents are dead will be restored to me. I am glad Paul and the Lord Jesus do not want me to be uninformed. I cannot imagine my grief without my hope.

Friday of Pentecost 23 – Matthew 25:1-13

¹“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. ⁶But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. ⁸And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹But the wise answered, saying, ‘Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.’ ¹⁰And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. ¹¹Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹²But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ ¹³Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Do you remember when you learned how to drive? I was a bit nervous despite all my adolescent attempts to look cool and collected. Even though I had driven tractors in the field, there were so many things going on with a car on the road that I had never considered as a passenger. There

were all these buttons and knobs and dials in front of me. It was a manual transmission so there was a clutch and shifting to master. There were cars coming toward me and away. Some were turning off or onto the road. It was a sensory overload. I was exhausted after my first lessons. It did not help that my father was giving me those lessons. As I become more comfortable with driving, I began to know what to pay attention to and what was not an immediate threat. I could find the turn signal without taking my eyes off the road and now often have no recollection whatsoever of shifting through the gears of my manual transmission. I no longer dread starting on a hill. But I still must watch what I am doing.

Jesus enjoins us to watchfulness today, a close attention to those things which are necessary. I think we often get hung up on this parable with the strange image of the virgins awaiting the bridegroom. Wedding practices in the ancient Mediterranean basin were very different than our weddings. We pay attention to the virgins but do not listen to Jesus. The result I think is that this parable comes off like financial planning in overdrive. Make sure your 401k oil-stocks are filled so you are ready for whatever comes. Jesus, however, does not enjoin us to fill our oil reservoirs at the end. He tells us to watch.

What is Christian watchfulness? It is not standing out on some hill in a white robe with your head tipped back and eyes on the sky. It is paying attention to the life which God has given me to live. The Jesus who appears on that last day is here right now. He is in the people I serve, and He is in me as I serve them. I will recognize Jesus on that last day, not only because the myriads of angels on either side will be a dead give-away. He will not need a name tag. But I will know Him, and He will know me because we have lived a watchful life together. I have seen His face in the child whose thirst I have slaked, the prisoner visited, the hungry man fed, and the woman who wears the coat I gave her. I have seen His face in the many who have extended to me a hand of help and blessing on my own days of need. In those relationships of care and love, I have watched Him. He has memorized my eyes in the moment of my baptism. I will know Him, and He will know me. He tells us today to watch for Him right now.