

Monday of Pentecost 24 – Prayer of the Week

Almighty and ever-living God, You have given exceedingly great and precious promises to those who trust in You. Dispel from us the works of darkness and grant us to live in the light of Your Son, Jesus Christ, that our faith may never be found wanting; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

If you live in any community for very long, you will run into someone like this. Usually the whole community is aware of them. They are dangerous people, apt to explode. When I grew up there was a fellow like that. He was angry all the time and people gave him a wide berth. He was a harsh, hard-edged man. Through the pull of his daughter and wife, however, he eventually came into church. He had enrolled his daughter in a local parochial school. He was not about to have any of that religious stuff, but it was a good school.

Then he came to her Christmas program. She was a character in the Nativity story. Her class sang. I think he could not keep his guard up against those words when it was his little girl singing the songs. And the Holy Spirit found a way inside his heart.

What followed was wonderful, even shocking to watch. Piece by piece the Spirit disassembled the life of anger and defensiveness which he had so thoroughly constructed for himself. It was not a momentary thing. It took time, but the change marched on. I think of this man when I pray that God would “dispel from us the works of darkness.” Years later folks would come to church and be shocked to see him sitting in a pew with his family, smiling and laughing with folks before or after a service. “Is that really who I think it is?” they would ask.

In one sense, no it was not him anymore. God had granted him, in some measure, to live in the light of His Son. As Paul, another fellow who was called from the works of darkness to live in the light, once wrote: it is Christ who lives in us (Galatians 2:20). Sometimes we imagine that our lives are ours to amend and fix. The whole self-help industry is built on this assumption. But the Bible speaks another word. God’s promises work a miracle in the lives of people and bring forward the faith which we desperately need.

This week and next we consider the end of things, the judgment of God, and the reappearance of Christ on the last day as our glorious King. Your enemy will want you to focus on how you have failed and to fear that day. It will all be true. You have failed. But that message is critically incomplete. For God has not failed. He has kept His promises. Sometimes, like in the life of the man I once feared and later called friend, I can see the promises clearly. But the promises still are true, even when I cannot see them. Christ has made me holy in His blood. He has risen from the dead so He can be my judge and judge me based on His work on my behalf. He has promised me life, not death.

Tuesday of Pentecost 24 – Zephaniah 1:7-16

⁷ Be silent before the Lord GOD!

For the day of the LORD is near;
the LORD has prepared a sacrifice
and consecrated his guests.

⁸ And on the day of the LORD's sacrifice—

“I will punish the officials and the king's sons
and all who array themselves in foreign attire.

⁹ On that day I will punish

everyone who leaps over the threshold,
and those who fill their master's house
with violence and fraud.

¹⁰ “On that day,” declares the LORD,

“a cry will be heard from the Fish Gate,
a wail from the Second Quarter,
a loud crash from the hills.

¹¹ Wail, O inhabitants of the Mortar!

For all the traders are no more;
all who weigh out silver are cut off.

¹² At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,
and I will punish the men

who are complacent,
those who say in their hearts,

‘The LORD will not do good,
nor will he do ill.’

¹³ Their goods shall be plundered,
and their houses laid waste.

Though they build houses,
they shall not inhabit them;
though they plant vineyards,
they shall not drink wine from them.”

¹⁴ The great day of the LORD is near,
near and hastening fast;

the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter;
the mighty man cries aloud there.

¹⁵ A day of wrath is that day,

a day of distress and anguish,
a day of ruin and devastation,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness,

¹⁶ a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
against the fortified cities
and against the lofty battlements.

I hope you have not been leaping over your threshold! (Look at vs. 9.) Zephaniah wrote these words in the waning days of Judah's "independence" prior to the Babylonian captivity. We think threshold leaping was a superstition which suggested reliance on a false god (perhaps like some people today avoid stepping on sidewalk cracks). He wrote in a moment when Zephaniah could be heard, the days of good King Josiah, but the wicked ways of Josiah's wretched predecessor Manasseh had been deeply ingrained. Zephaniah and his colleague, Jeremiah, desperately were calling their people to repent and amend their ways before the hammer of God's judgment fell upon them. This effort failed. Within the lifetimes of many of their hearers, the kingdom was brutally conquered by Nebuchadnezzar, not once but twice. The words of Zephaniah here about wailing throughout the city, searching with lamps, and houses laid waste were agonizingly accurate. They did not get to drink the wine from the vineyards they had planted. They were led out of the city chained together with hooks in their jaws.

If you have ever watched someone make a train wreck of his or her life, you know a little of what the prophets were dealing with. I once watched with sadness as a young woman married the man who had gotten her pregnant. As many suspected, he was not a good boyfriend and he was not a good husband or father either. We were there to pick up the pieces of her life with her daughters and family, but the heartache was gut-wrenching for her and everyone who cared for her.

Zephaniah the prophet sees more than one day. He saw the day of Nebuchadnezzar's brutality, but he also sees a day of universal judgment, the day of the Lord Jesus. That day will fall hard upon those who are complacent, who imagine that the Lord does neither good nor ill. But there is hope. Look again at the first verse of this reading. The Lord has prepared a sacrifice and consecrated His guests. The sacrifice is the death of Christ on the cross. God has consecrated His guests in the waters of Baptism, including your Baptism.

Wednesday of Pentecost 24 – Psalm 90:1-12

Lord, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations.

² Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

³ You return man to dust
and say, "Return, O children of man!"

⁴ For a thousand years in your sight
are but as yesterday when it is past,
or as a watch in the night.

⁵ You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning:

⁶ in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.

⁷ For we are brought to an end by your anger;
by your wrath we are dismayed.

⁸ You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your presence.

⁹ For all our days pass away under your wrath;
we bring our years to an end like a sigh.

¹⁰ The years of our life are seventy,
or even by reason of strength eighty;
yet their span is but toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.

¹¹ Who considers the power of your anger,
and your wrath according to the fear of you?

¹² So teach us to number our days
that we may get a heart of wisdom.

We sometimes get the idea that our current polarized and fragmented society is a new thing, never before seen in the world. That is hardly the case. Consider 17th century England. It started out well with King James riding down from Scotland to assume the throne peaceably after Elizabeth's long reign. He authorized the translation of the Bible into the King James Version which shaped so much of the English language. James was an able politician who managed to keep the roiling societal and national tensions balanced out. But things quickly went awry. His son, Charles, was not so capable. The parliament entered open rebellion against him. A civil war ensued; the king lost not only the war but his head in a public execution. Our Oliver Cromwell took over. Cromwell was better at winning wars than governing and enforced his very severe form of Puritanism on England. Eventually the people had had enough, kicked Oliver's son out of power and invited Charles II back to resume the monarchy. I have heard it said that Cromwell's big mistake was in outlawing Christmas celebrations. They were too "popish." But the English people loved Christmas carols and outlawing such singing was too much.

In the second half of that century, after much blood had been spilt, tensions continued to run high. (Charles II was long thought to be a closet Catholic and his brother, James, was a Catholic in fact.) Religion and politics were a toxic mix. By the end of the century another revolution would take place, this time less bloody, ushering out the house of Stuart and bringing in the thoroughly protestant William and Mary as co-regents.

The church was a total mess at the time. The Church of England was pulled this way and that. A great many of the faithful mistrusted it and formed unaffiliated congregations, often called independents or dissenters. Some of them were so fed up with the situation they left for the new world on a ship called the Mayflower and many subsequent sailing ships. One of the dissenting preachers still in England pulled his son aside and urged him to write hymns. But they had to be the right sort of hymns: none of this popery. Hymns should only be based on the Word of God, the Psalms in particular. The son's name was

Isaac Watts. He heard his father's admonition and became the father of English protestant hymnody. The hymn he wrote based upon this psalm is perhaps his most famous: "O God Our Help in Ages Past."

I encourage you to pull your hymnal (LSB #733) out or if a hymnal is not handy, you can look it up online. Here is a link where you can listen to it being sung: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4WCLIC-LLs> But don't just read or listen. Read the psalm and the lyrics of the hymn and see how Watts masterfully interpreted and applied them to his own time and ours. Remember, these words were written for a time perhaps even more conflicted and contentious than our own. David also wrote in such a time. God means these words for you right now.

Thursday of Pentecost 24 – I Thessalonians 5:1-11

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. ² For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. ⁴ But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. ⁵ For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. ⁶ So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹ For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

Did you eat breakfast cereal this morning? Did you know the connection breakfast cereal has to this passage? In the 1830's a Baptist farmer named William Miller concluded that he had unlocked the puzzle of when Jesus was returning. It would happen in the next decade, specifically on October 22, 1844. He started publicizing this and gathered a tremendous audience of people through his printed pamphlets and articles. As the fateful day approached, many worked themselves into a frenzy, selling property, assembling on hilltops to await the dawning of the day, and radically changing their lives. October 22 came and went. Nothing happened. This has come to be known as "The Great Disappointment."

Among those who were disappointed was a woman named Ellen White. She claimed to have visions which suggested that Miller was right, but Jesus' return was spiritual and not visible. She claimed that through Ellen He would declare his will for the new age. You probably know some of Ellen's spiritual heirs, they are the Seventh Day Adventists today. According to Ellen we are to worship on Saturdays. She also said that we are to be vegetarians and follow many other rules. Among her eager followers was an enterprising fellow who transformed breakfast with a vegetarian option to the ham and eggs most were eating. His name was W. M. Kellogg, the man who brought corn flakes to American breakfast tables.

No one knows the day or hour of the Lord's return. Many predict the end of the world based on erroneous readings of Scripture as Miller did. Some have pointed to the fact that 2020 has met many of

the criteria for end of the world tribulation: plague, famine, war, even a plague of locusts in Africa. I am tired of this pandemic and find myself yearning for Christ to reveal His kingdom and usher in heavenly bliss. That is God's call to make, however, not mine. He tells me it will surprise me, like a thief in the night. My job right now is to live as a child of that heavenly light which is dawning even now in the waters of my baptism, in the proclamation of the kingdom, in the preaching of forgiveness, and God's love for His broken world. On that day of Christ's revealing, the opportunity to love someone into the kingdom will be over. That is my task for today, not to worry about days or times, but to love the sinners He has put into my life with Christ's love.

Friday of Pentecost 24 – Matthew 25:14-30

¹⁴“For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. ¹⁵To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. ¹⁷So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. ¹⁸But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.’ ²¹His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ ²²And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.’ ²³His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ ²⁴He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ ²⁶But his master answered him, ‘You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. ²⁹For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ³⁰And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

I know someone who actually won the fancy car at a casino. You sometimes see these promotions. They put a very expensive car out on the floor behind a bank of slot machines. You put your coin in and pull the handle. If you get the right combination, you win the car. I know someone gave it a try and who won. She was an elderly woman with a compromised hip who could not even get in or get out of such a low-slung sports car, so she sold it back and took the cash. She even made a sizeable donation to church.

What would you do with a treasure entrusted to you? I like to think that I would make some dramatic gift or fund some good thing. So far God has not brought me to that moment of trial. Not being the sort

of person inclined to feed slot machines or state lottery funds, it is not likely anyway. But in fact, I have come into a great treasure.

The talents in the parable Jesus tells us today are not talents as we use the word, e.g., the ability to play the piano or public speaking. In the ancient world a talent was a unit of money, a very large unit of money. It was in fact the amount of gold or silver that a slave could carry for a day, about 35 pounds. The only entities which dealt in talents of money were governments and the ultra-wealthy. Each of these servants received a vast treasure. This is not, however, a parable about money alone. What is the treasure we have received from God? Is it not the forgiveness of our sins? What could be a greater treasure than that?

Two servants invest their talent. How does one invest forgiveness? Is it not by forgiving another sinner? Does the five-talent fellow simply realize that he has been forgiven of much, so he forgives on a grand scale? But what about that wretch with only one talent? He buries his treasure in he back yard. Is he the person who has been forgiven but who refuses to forgive? I think so. This is the danger of being a person who tries to keep the commandments, is faithful to spouse, puts an offering in the plate every Sunday, etc. We can start to imagine that our well-lived life is the goal of Christ's kingdom. It is not. It is a good thing and God delights in your happiness and health, but the goal of the kingdom is the forgiveness of sinners. That is why Christ has invested so much in you. Yes, despite your relatively well-lived life, you too need a great deal of forgiveness. Even when you pray and sing hymns in church you need it. And He gives it freely. But that freely given gift, which never runs out, is purposeful. Through you, He would give it to others. We dare not keep it for ourselves or bury it in fear in the privacy of our religious life. Do you have someone in your life to forgive, someone who has done you wrong? Most of us do. Forgive that person today. Say it to him or her. Announce that Jesus has died for what that person has done. Be an investor in the kingdom of God.