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St. Mark Lutheran Church, Lindenhurst, IL
3rd Sunday in Epiphany
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“A Reality Presently Hidden”

Scripture Texts:

Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Psalm 62:5-12
1 Corinthians 7:29-31
Mark 1:14-20

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen.

As I reflected upon our four Scripture readings for this week, it occurred to me that there is a common thread running between all of them. Each of these texts in its own distinctive way reminds us that God wants His people to order their lives in light of realities which are not yet fully visible.

If you think about it, this is actually a fundamental theme of the Christian faith. To become a Christian is to acknowledge that the world as we experience it now will not last forever. A day is coming when Jesus will return to judge the earth, and when he does, this present evil age and its lusts will pass away (1 John 2:17). Isaiah tells us that God will one day roll up the cosmos like a blanket, and He will establish a new heaven and a new earth (Is. 34:4; Rev. 6:14). On that day, a new reality will dawn. Few writers have expressed this point more powerfully than C.S. Lewis.

God will invade. But I wonder whether [we] quite realize what it will be like when He does. When that happens, it is the end of the world. When the author walks on to the stage the play is over. God is going to invade, all right: but what is the good of saying you are on His side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else - something it never entered your head to conceive - comes crashing in; something so beautiful to some of us and so terrible to others that none of us will have any choice left? For this time it will be God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature.”¹

Human beings ultimately make choices about how to live based upon what they expect the future to look like, and what they believe is most real. Those who expect a famine store up provisions. Those anticipating the birth of a child gather the necessary supplies, and prepare a room. When Florida residents expect a tropical storm to make landfall, they shutter the windows, purchase drinkable water, and bunker down in fortified shelters.

¹C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon and Schuster Touchstone, 1996): 65-6.

Christianity offers us a vision of the future and a picture of reality. That vision includes a king who rules (even though many presently rebel), a God who judges (even though the wicked often seem to prosper), and a Savior who redeems (even though it sometimes appears as though evil has the upper hand). Our Christian hope is that one day this cosmic reality—presently hidden from our sight—will become fully manifest. As Lewis puts it, the “whole natural universe” will melt “away like a dream and something else” will come “crashing in.”² The critical question I want us to ask today is how we ought to live *now* in light of radical vision. What does it mean for us to prepare for the glorious reality of God’s coming kingdom even as we still live in the world which is passing away?

Our four Scripture passages offer some helpful guidance. They do not all directly address the coming of Christ’s glorious kingdom at the end of the age, but each of them teaches us something important about what it looks like to align our lives with a reality that is not yet fully visible. These passages help us to see that living in light of God’s reality requires trust, repentance, and a radical adjustment of our priorities. Let’s explore each of these things, taking them in reverse order.

New Priorities

1 Corinthians 7 is the most explicitly apocalyptic of our four texts. It focuses on the end of the age, and what it means for us. The time is growing very short (v. 29), Paul tells us, and the “the present form of this world is passing away” (v. 31). Paul’s purpose in this chapter is to explain (with special reference to marriage) what happens when we truly embrace the fact that the world as we now know it will not continue much longer. A person’s priorities are bound to change in light of that knowledge. We will surely cling less tightly to the things of this earth. Some of the pursuits that might otherwise appear very important to us before may now seem frivolous and quite inconsequential. Ultimately, it is a matter of perspective. Our understanding of what is real, and our belief about what comes next determines our priorities, and our priorities govern the way we use our time, our talents, and our treasures.

Perspective matters even when thinking about worldly pursuits. A recent book by *New York Times* columnist David Brooks explains the difference between the kind of accomplishments one typically lists on a CV, and the qualities one typically emphasizes in a friend’s eulogy. Brooks notes how many people spend most of their lives anxiously pursuing the CV virtues of achievement, performance, success, and status. But as we gain broader perspective about life, we quickly realize that the so-called eulogy virtues are actually far more important. It does us no good to be very successful professionally if we are entirely miserable on a personal level. When we recognize that the depth of our character and the strength of our relationships are more precious than professional achievement, we change the way we live and the way we invest our time.

In 1 Corinthians 7 we see a similar shift in perspective, but it is even more radical in its scope. The knowledge that a new reality is dawning, and that the present world is passing away relativizes the value of *all* earthly goods. When we embrace this cosmic vision of what comes next, we quickly understand that *nothing* is more important than living faithfully before God. Everything else in our lives must come in second to this—the things which cause us to rejoice, the things which cause us to mourn (v. 30), even good things ordained by God like marriage and family (v.29). Yes, all these things must assume secondary importance in light of the glorious reality which is yet to be revealed. In short, 1 Corinthians 7 should cause us to reexamine our priorities. What are we living for? What are we most concerned about? Those who recognize that the “present form of this world

²Ibid.

is passing away” seek to please the Lord above all else (v. 32). The radical adjustment of priorities is an important aspect of what it means to align our lives with a reality that is yet to come.

Repentance

A second way we order our lives in light of this hidden reality is through repentance. Repentance is an exercise of re-alignment. It is a sober acknowledgment of the fact that the trajectory of our life is not aligning with the will of God. One way to understand sin would be to define it as a pattern of living which behaves as if God is not actually our king and our judge. But of course, God *is* our king and judge, so sin is kind of deluded fantasy. Sin does not submit to reality, but grates against it.

And unfortunately, God’s people often slip into fantasy. We struggle to believe that God is really in control. We take matters into our hands. We turn to false gods, and we embrace interpretations of reality which give us an excuse to live as we please. When God shows patience in the face of this disobedience (not desiring that any should perish), we confuse His patience for impotence or indifference. In the Old Testament, God typically responds to these deluded fantasies by sending a prophet to administer a dose of reality. God really is sovereign. God really is judge. We may not see it just yet, but the day of reckoning is right around the corner. And it is time to realign with reality or to suffer the consequences. This is the basic message with which most of the synoptic Gospels begin. John the Baptist arrives on the scene preaching a message of repentance. The kingdom of God is coming, so it is time to abandon our sinful delusions, and to embrace the reality of God’s Lordship.

Jonah chapter 3 offers an especially interesting example of this theme. Jonah is sent to the pagan city of Nineveh to announce a word of judgment. “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” And contrary to what Jonah expected (and what he hoped would happen), the people of Nineveh listened to Jonah, and thoroughly repented. Verse 5: “And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.”

Nineveh believed God. Have you ever wondered why the people of Nineveh repented? The Ninevites were not members of God’s covenant people. They had their own gods, their own religious traditions, and their own laws. And what’s more, the city was quite prosperous—an “exceedingly great city” (v. 3) as our text puts it. It was the capital city of the Assyrian empire which was a dominant superpower within the Ancient Near East at this time. Why would the Ninevites heed the warnings of this sojourning prophet from a much weaker nation which posed no immediate threat whatsoever?

I’m not sure the text gives us a precise answer to that question, but the point I want to emphasize here is that Nineveh had no empirical reason for believing Jonah. Nothing about their circumstances made it appear likely that Nineveh would soon be overthrown. It would have been easy to dismiss Jonah’s message as empty words—the prattling of a powerless charlatan. The reality of divine judgment was hidden from their sight. But despite all this, Nineveh *believed*, and Nineveh *repented*. In so doing, it became a lasting example to God’s people through the ages of what it means to align oneself with a reality that is not yet visible.

You see, repentance is always an act of faith to some extent. To repent is to acknowledge that we really do live in a morally serious universe even if it looks like wickedness often prospers. It is to accept the fact that we really are accountable to God even if it looks like the guilty often get off scot free. Yes, repentance is an expression of what we view as ultimately real. And for those who believe in a coming judgment (something we confess each week in the apostles’ creed), repentance is a very natural way in which we align our lives with reality.

Trust

Ordering one's life in light of a reality which is not yet fully visible is not easy. It is difficult to hold the things of this earth loosely. Repentance likewise is often a painful and costly experience. Like Asaph in Psalm 73, it can be easy for us to wonder if it really all worth it. We live in a culture which is constantly encouraging us to embrace an alternative interpretation of reality—a reality according to which the path to happiness involves living for the present and embracing as many transitory pleasures as this life can afford us. Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.³

Following the way of Jesus in a context like ours requires a deep and abiding confidence that God can be trusted, and that His ways are best. Our Psalm takes us to the crux of the issue. Psalm 62 helps us to see that aligning our lives God's reality is ultimately a matter of trust. "For God *alone* my soul in silence waits; from him comes my salvation. He *only* is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken" (vv. 1-2). The Psalmist is emphatic on this point, because he recognizes that our trust in God is constantly under siege. It is assailed in times of trouble, when it looks like God has abandoned us to our enemies (vv. 3-4). It is undermined in times of uncertainty, when it looks like we need to take matters into our own hands, and abandon God's ways in order to get ahead (vv. 9-10).

We still live in the crosshairs of these temptations. Christians straddle the fence between the world as it operates now, and a coming reality where things will be different. In all sorts of ways big and small, we are forced to choose each day which state of affairs we will ultimately embrace as most real. Those choices boil down finally to a matter of trust. Are we willing to trust God and cling to His promises even when doing so may appear costly for us? The good news is that God really can be trusted. He really is our refuge, our fortress, and One who is mighty to save. When we trust God, we align ourselves with a hidden reality which is yet to be fully manifest.

Conclusion

The time to prepare for a hurricane is before you can actually see it with your own two eyes. I've never been in Florida when a large storm is on the way, but I have to imagine it is a surreal experience to watch everyone nailing plywood to their windows while the weather is still 72 degrees with a gentle breeze. If you did that sort of thing in the Midwest, we'd think you were crazy! Whether it is crazy to board up windows depends entirely upon whether a storm is actually on its way. Only a fool would neglect appropriate preparations with a category 5 hurricane drawing near.

God is not a tropical storm, but Scripture clearly indicates that a new reality is on its way to our shores. We cannot quite see it now, but when it arrives everything will be different. The world in its present form will pass away, and the kingdom of God will be established among us. God is calling us in the meantime to be those who align with the reality that is yet to come. We do that by reexamining our priorities, through continual repentance, and above all, by trusting God and taking Him at His word.

What exactly this means in particular terms will look different for each of us. We are all facing different struggles, different temptations, and different challenges. But no matter where the Lord has placed you, He is calling you today to align your life more directly with the reality of His coming kingdom. As I conclude my sermon, I'd like to pause in silence for a minute or so to allow each of us prayerfully to consider what this means for us in our own unique circumstances in life. Where is God calling you to adjust your priorities? Where is God calling to repent? Where if God asking you to trust Him? After a time of personal reflection, I will close the sermon with a brief word of prayer.

³See Isaiah 22:13; Proverbs 23:35; Luke 12:19; and 1 Corinthians 15:32.

Almighty God, we eagerly anticipate the day when your will truly will be done on earth even as it is in heaven. Supply each of us with the wisdom to discern your will, and by your Spirit give us the strength and courage necessary to walk in it. Amen.