

July 19, 2020

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit:

Today's readings, in conjunction with the current state of our nation and world, brought a quotation immediately to mind. Drawing on another well known phrase, this version comes to us from the great repository of theological wisdom that is the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Trying to drive home the gravity of the situation in final episode of season one, beloved teacher Jenny Calendar announces to the rest of the characters: "The end... is seriously nigh."

Reading the gospel, *this* gospel reading, In these days of climate change, civic unrest, fraying democracy, and the increasingly epic plague conditions we live under, I find myself reading today's scripture *anxious*:

First, I am often uncomfortable with the parts of scripture that speak of throwing the evildoers "into the furnace of fire where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." It is so... harsh, so final. And it makes me wonder, and I suspect we rightly should wonder, am I the wheat or the weed in this scenario? The trouble here, though, is that I don't just wonder: it makes me anxious. Just how concerned should I be here, Jesus? The furnace of fire makes me *anxious* about whether I'm making the grade, and anxiety is rarely the precondition for acting well.

Second, if the concern is making the grade, this furnace of fire also makes me anxious to know—so to speak—exactly what part of the semester we're in. The furnace of fire seems not in accordance with that lovely (AND much more comfortable to preach on) passage from Matthew 18—just a few chapters on—where Jesus exhorts us to forgive "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." Seventy-seven is a lot—yet, I surmise that the furnace of fire ζ must be what happens, say, ζ the seventy-eighth time? We might wonder just how many of these these seventy-seven chances we've already run through? Both of these trains of thought make me deeply anxious. I am uncomfortable with feeling like I might not be measuring up, right now. I'm not doing enough, helping enough; that I am surely sinning in thought, word, and deed by why I do and by what I fail to do. I am uncomfortably unsure whether I am wheat or weed. And I am uncomfortable with the sense of urgency that makes me feel like this question exists within a high stakes game of musical chairs. I do not know, when the music stops, will I still be on my seventy-fourth forgiveness, (*band swipe*) or am I already hovering past 82? ... It's enough to make me weep and gnash my teeth *right now*.

This kind of thinking itself is problematic—it leads us to think of our good and bad as checks and demerits. But it is such a common trap it's worth noting. And the reason it's a common

trap is this sense of high stakes musical chairs. The checks and demerits will serve for a different sermon, Paul is right here with us in the anxiety about the end. Paul, too, thought the end was seriously nigh. Part of the sense of urgency that we get from Paul derives from the fact that he *did* believe this. Jesus says, yet further along, in Matthew 24, “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day[b] your Lord is coming.” In Paul, we get a sense of urgency such that we might imagine (I know I have) that from the moment of his conversion on the road to Damascus, that he *actually* has not slept. The entire second half of today’s epistle brims with the feeling, though it’s not articulated here, that the “glory about to be revealed” or the “revealing of the children of God” will be something that Paul lives to see. It feels to me like Paul is *also* driven to be in the right place when the music stops, and he’s pretty sure the music is stopping soon.

But if Paul carries with him the always driving sense of urgency to accomplish what he feels that God has called him to do as soon as he can, he also recognizes that there is a way in which he does not know what he is talking about. He didn’t. And neither do we. None of us do. We don’t know what the end will look like, nor do we really know what it will look like when the end is seriously nigh. We may try to read the signs, but that is not the form of Christian hope that Paul is talking about here. “Now hope that is seen,” he writes, “is not hope.” No, “*we* hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” Ever urgent Paul, hopping on ships to evangelize to the far corners of the world as he knew it, this Paul, ALSO waits with patience.

Urgency, tempered with patience. Well, it seems an improvement over weeping and gnashing of teeth. Paul is waiting for revelation. Paul is waiting for it to be shown to him the things he cannot see. Paul is waiting, because these things are not going to occur in a time that he decrees: Paul cannot make them happen. They will occur in God’s time. And God is working in the world: through Paul, and I hope through me, and I hope, through each of you. As catastrophic as things are, when we take the time, for example, as I hope all of us did this week, to sit with the legacy of the late John Lewis, we should see that God was working in the world through Representative Lewis. When we see his spiritual descendants in the streets protesting injustice, we should see that God is working in the world. So we have Urgency: DO SOMETHING NOW! tempered by patience: God is working in the world.

Now I could stop here. I’m tempted. I’ve covered a bit of the epistle and a bit of the Gospel. I’ve even crafted a pithy take-home statement. But I believe there is more to be said.

When I reflect that I have been surprised by many of the events of the past few years, past few months, I have to face that that is a serious mark in the “weed” column for me. If *I* am only coming to the feeling of urgency now, that can only be a measure of how deeply—and how not to my credit—I was not paying attention. Some of today’s events are repeating cycles with eerie familiarity.

Climate change: The Clean Air of 1963 and Water Act of 1972 showed that we, as a society, recognized our power to harm the earth. Or the furor over the ozone layer in the 80s: we have known that something was coming for while.

The fraying of our democracy: When the fairness doctrine was removed from the FCC rules governing broadcast journalism, when public education has been repeatedly defunded and continues to be linked to property values, and as ideological trends that I, at least, dismissed as “fringe” crept more and more persistently to the center of the stage, we *could* have known that something was coming. And if we truly think that the humans of United States are fundamentally and essentially better and more moral than the humans of Germany, Cambodia, Rwanda, or the Ottoman Empire, we have fallen victim to a dangerous pride.

Pandemics: Ever since the London Cholera outbreak was linked to a particular water pump in 1849, we have known that small actions, like bringing home a bucket of water, can have widespread health consequences. And during the Flu epidemic of the early 20th century, an “Anti-Mask League” was formed in San Francisco, so we have known that we as humans do not always react rationally to health emergencies.

Protest: the scale of protest we are now seeing, look back to the Civil War itself, to the Wilmington insurrection of 1898, to the Tulsa Massacre of 1921, to Civil Rights marches and demonstrations of the 1960s, we have known that the fabric of American race relations is not well woven.

Cycles or no cycles, it *feels* like end times to me. It felt like end times to Paul. And that feeling can lead to despair—as I suspect it has sometimes for each of us, especially in quarantine—but it is *hope* that Paul calls us to. Hope in the actions of God, working in the world. This hope is the mechanism that both fuels the urgency, and tempers it with patience. So, Hope. Feel the pull of urgency to *do* something. Get on a ship, join the protest, sew more masks, use less plastic, live into the *reality* that Black Lives do Matter, feel that urgency. The urgency is real! But hope tells us that the patience is real too. The patience is forgiving our neighbors, our enemies, *and ourselves*, seventy-seven times when we fall short of the mark. Patience is doing what you can every day. Patience is praying at night in the words the New Zealand prayerbook: “What has been done has been done. What has

not been done has not been done. Help us let it be.” And patience is, yes, getting enough sleep even when the exhortation to “stay awake” feels like a call to hyper-vigilance. Patience is sitting with God in prayer, every day, and asking to see where God is working in the world.

Urgency is in the words of today’s psalm:

The arrogant rise up against me, O God,
and a band of violent men seeks my life; *
they have not set you before their eyes.

But Patience is in the psalmist’s mouth as well:

You, O Lord, are gracious and full of compassion, *
slow to anger, and full of kindness and truth.
Turn to me and have mercy upon me; *
give your strength to your servant;

The end may well be seriously nigh. We do not know. But we can turn to face it; Work to make it the best end we can, if end it will be. And we can *also* turn to God, gracious and full of compassion, who will have mercy, and will give us strength.

Amen.

Texts for July 19, 2020

[Isaiah 44:6-8](#)

[Psalm 86:11-17](#)

[Romans 8:12-25](#)

[Matthew 13:24-30,36-43](#)



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