

Sermon preached at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford

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Proper 28, Year C

Faithful people pray for peace and still there are wars. We work to elect good leaders and yet we have political enmity and impeachment proceedings. Generous people give their time to tutor disadvantaged inner city children and work in shelters and soup kitchens; they give money to support half-way houses and rehabilitation programs; they back federal and state anti-poverty programs; and yet the poor are always with us. Are our efforts all for nothing? Caring people pray for healing for troubled relationships and for sick friends and loved ones. And yet those we pray for get divorced; they die. Why God? Do you not hear our cry? Are you powerless to help?

Such questions are as old as belief. They are the questions that the prophet Malachi was addressing in Israel some 2,500 years ago. Good and faithful people were getting discouraged at the ways things were going. They were asking, "What's the use of trying to keep God's commands? Evil-doers not only prosper, but when they put God to the test, they escape." And against such discouragement, against such despair, the prophet proclaims the promises God makes to the faithful and good. First, I will never forget you. Second, the day is coming when I, God, will act to judge the arrogant and evil-doers and establish justice. "Then once more you shall see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not."

"The day is coming;" that's the promise God makes to strengthen the dispirited of every age. When everything seems to be going awry, when the world seems to be falling apart, do not despair; look up because God is about to act. That's what Jesus is saying in today's reading from the Gospel of Luke. There will be wars and insurrections, earthquakes, famines, plagues; there will be persecutions and great suffering. But do not be afraid, do not give up. "Not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

Hold fast to what is good because God is going to make all things turn out right. Is that just wishful thinking or is it the source of strength for courageous and productive living?

Consider the remarkable example of Harriet Tubman, whose life and mission are the subject of a current film. Born into slavery in Maryland, Tubman escaped to freedom in the north. However, at enormous risk, Tubman subsequently returned to the South thirteen times to lead more than seventy enslaved people to freedom, using the network of anti-slavery activists and safe houses known as the Underground Railroad. What inspired Harriet's heroic efforts? First, she believed that God had called her to free her people, just as God had called Moses to free God's people from bondage in Egypt. And secondly, she believed that because her cause was Godly, God was with her and would guide and protect her.

Some one hundred years later, Martin Luther King continued the work of liberation of black Americans by fighting against segregation, the system of racial discrimination that perpetuated the heritage of slavery. On Freedom marches that he led through our country's South, Dr. King and his followers were routinely spat upon, beaten, vilified, and imprisoned. And yet they continued on. Why? Because they believed their cause was Godly and that God would win in the end. Shortly before his assassination, Dr. King declared that he no longer cared what might happen to him because he had been to the mountaintop and had been given a vision of the new world of freedom and equality that God has in store.

Nearer to home, let me tell you about a congregation I know and about a family I will call the Smiths. Mrs. Smith, a nurse, died some years ago, leaving her two daughters in the care of their father. Mr. Smith, to give him a charitable description, was a malingerer. He had few resources; he was limited intellectually, financially, emotionally, and spiritually. What he did have was a parish church that knew no one would take care of the girls

unless the parish did. They drove the family to church every Sunday; they took the children into their homes for weekends and holidays; they found violin lessons for Grace, the older daughter. When Grace became a rebellious adolescent, they sent her to a church school, away from the city high school that was exerting a bad influence on her. As graduation approached and Grace's grades were barely adequate, the parish found a U. S. Navy program that would send her to a remedial college and then on to nurse's training. Since Grace was twelve pounds too heavy for the Navy, a parishioner took her to a weight loss clinic – but even though she slimmed down, Grace never joined the military. Instead she moved in with a man her father's age, had a child and is now on welfare.

Molly, the younger daughter, did somewhat better. She got a scholarship to a private college. The parish gave her a bit for living expenses and sent her the church newsletter and care packages ... until Molly moved in with her boyfriend and got pregnant.

The girls haven't gone to church in years except to get the babies baptized, and the congregation has given up inviting them to events. But this is a faithful parish. No one complains that their ministry with the Smith girls was a waste of time. The parishioners did what they could and they trust God to water the good seeds that they have planted. They wouldn't say so, but they do these things because they believe that the "Day of the Lord" is coming. They have not grown weary of well-doing when they don't see many results, because they know that they will not have to carry the ball forever, that they are just helping out until God takes over. When they decide to let go of a project, they don't count it a failure; they just decide that they need bigger hands – God's hands – to manage it from then on.

Now I have told you this lengthy story because it is a story of people who have not grown weary in doing what is right. They would have been exhausted long ago if they believed that they had only their own resources to rely on. But like Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King, and other heroes, they know that they have more than their own resources. They don't labor alone but in a community of faith, and they know that if they are faithful in small ways, God will be faithful in big ways.

When we have to lean on our own resources, trusting only in our own wisdom, our own stamina, we either get a swelled head when things go well or get discouraged when they fail. Yet it is at the point of our weariness, when we are ready to quit, when our energy is all used up and we are burned out, that we need the vision of the approaching end to sustain us. There is a finish line. We can run the race with patience and hope and endurance because God promises that the end is in view and that we don't have to bear our burdens forever.

And so, believe it or not, the "Day of the Lord," the end of the world as we know it, the judgment caricatured by all those *New Yorker* cartoons, is not something to fear but something to give us reassurance and courage. We need a lot of reassurance and courage if we are to endure in dealing with the enormous problems of the twenty-first century: political polarization, global warming, religious prejudice and conflict, racism, and the widening gap between rich and poor, to name but a few. We need a lot of reassurance and courage to face the pains of divorce and death, the fears of failing health and unemployment, the challenges of addiction and loss. We need to believe that God can and will complete what we begin. We need to trust that our work, our faith, our hope, our love are of utmost importance because they are the footprints God uses to walk the earth and make all things new