November 17, 2013

26th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 28)

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Michael and I went to see the movie Thor last night. It’s really, really good, if you like superhero movies – just the right combination of action, special effects, drama, and witty banter, I thought. For those of you who haven’t seen it, I won’t wreck it, but I will say that the end of the universe is part of the plot. I’m not giving anything away there, because some variant of that is often the plot of superhero movies – the end of the world, the end of the solar system, the end of the galaxy, and in this case, the end of everything. Every day fare for superheros.

But not so much for first century disciples of Jesus. There they are, hanging around in the temple, when someone comments on how beautiful the Temple is, with all of its rich decorations and precious stones, all dedicated to God. Maybe they were just making conversation, or maybe the subject comes up because of all of the rich people who were making contributions to the Temple that day.

But Jesus abruptly changes the subject. He starts talking about the end times, and in some pretty chilling terms. “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down," he tells them. Then he warns them not to follow the false messiahs who will rise up during the turmoil, and about the wars, and the natural disasters that will happen, and finally the persecutions that they themselves will face.

Real end of the world stuff. And no superheroes.

But then, after all of these harrowing predictions, he tells them something really unexpected. He had just finished telling them that some would be betrayed and some would die, then he says, “But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

It’s like the effect of cool water on a sunburn, or novocaine on an abscessed tooth. But it grates a little, too, being so contradictory to what had gone before. So, once again, it helps to look at the Greek.

Two words are important in this last part of this passage, “perish” and “soul.” The word for perish is *apollumi*, which means more than just to die. It means to be utterly and completely destroyed – to be obliterated.

If any of you have seen the movie, The Princess Bride, there’s a funny scene where a character named Miracle Max is talking about another character who has died. Someone is either mostly dead, he says, or all dead. If they’re mostly dead, they’re partly alive. But if they’re all dead the only thing left to do is go through their pockets and look for loose change. Well, *apollumi* means definitely all dead.

The other important word to focus on in this passage is “soul.” The Greek word here is *psuche*. In English, we pronounce that word “psyche,” which is where we get the word psychology. Most of the Bible translations use the word “soul” for this word, but once again the single English word doesn’t quite cover it. Psuche does mean soul, but it also means mind and identity and life.

So what Jesus is saying here is that, although his disciples might even die, they will never lose their soul, or their eternal life. They will never lose their place with God. It’s quite a promise.

There’s a lot going on in this passage. First of all, we have to remember that many of these terrible things had already come to pass by the time Luke is writing his Gospel, somewhere around 80 or 90AD. The worst had already happened to the Jews – their Temple had been completely destroyed by the Romans in 70AD and hundreds of thousands had been killed as the Romans squashed their rebellion completely. So Jesus’ disciples were in the dark, but Luke’s readers knew very well what Jesus was talking about here and had firsthand knowledge of those persecutions.

There are many of our fundamentalist brothers and sisters who look at this passage as a road map to the end times, along with the prophecies of Daniel and the book of the Revelation to John. Every time there is a natural disaster that fits this passage, or another war breaks out, the countdown begins.

But whether Jesus was being prophetic about the upcoming destruction of Jerusalem, or of the tribulations before his own second coming, there is also another message here. This is a message that we’ve heard a lot from Jesus, especially in Luke, although he doesn’t come right out and say it in this passage. That message is “fear not.”

I think I could preach a sermon every Sunday on the concept of fear, and fearing not. Not being afraid is one of the most pervasive themes in the entire Gospel, just as being afraid is one of the most pervasive things in our society here and now.

Here Jesus is telling his disciples that it’s going to get really bad – maybe even worse than they can imagine. But through it all, even if they lose their physical lives, their eternal soul is safe so no matter how terrible things get, they shouldn’t be afraid.

That’s all very well and good, but how do we get past our fears? I think the answer lies partly in the four verses that come just before this passage. They constitute their own little story, which might be why the people behind the Revised Common Lectionary left them off of today’s reading. It’s the story of the Widow’s Mite. On the day Jesus and his disciples are there, the Temple is full of wealthy people paying their tributes. Then along comes a poor widow, who drops two copper coins into the collection box.

Jesus says to his followers, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.”

This might be just more of the “rich-bad, poor-good” rhetoric that we find so often in Luke, but as is typical of Luke, there’s more to it than that. Yes, the widow gave all she had, and yes the rich people could well afford what they gave and she couldn’t. But the point isn’t that she gave all she had. The point is that she trusted God to provide for her, so she COULD give all she had. The rich people, even if they were faithful to God, didn’t have that kind of trust. They were afraid to give, even though they could.

But the widow wasn’t afraid. Practically speaking, she knew she might be risking starvation by giving God her last two coins. But she wasn’t being practical. She was being faithful. She was being grateful. She was unafraid to trust the God who gives everything, with her very life.

Can we do that? Can we be faithful, grateful, trusting, and unafraid? Can we trust that God will preserve us, even when things look really bad? When financial times are tough? When we need something and don’t have the resources on hand to provide it? I think we can. I think we have to.

I can’t promise that I won’t talk about pledging and stewardship anymore this year, but with the pledge cards going out this week chances are you won’t hear too much more from me on the subject. But I have to ask at least once more – how grateful are we for all that God’s given us? How trusting are we that, even if we give enough of our time, talent, and especially treasure so that it’s a noticeable sacrifice for us, that God will still provide for us? How much do we believe that our very lives are in God’s hands?

These are the questions to pray about and consider when you’re making your pledge this year. But these are also the questions that we should be thinking about and praying about all the time. Because if we do pray about these things on a regular basis, then when times are really bad, as they would become for the early followers of Jesus, we will have that endurance that Jesus talks about, that will save our very souls.

Fear not. God WILL provide.

Amen.