



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 23 - Proper 28 (C)
November 17, 2019

RCL: Isaiah 65:17-25; Canticle 9; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

There is a pervading sense of both the present and the future in each of these readings. Indeed, the readings share a seemingly apocalyptic language with their repeated and related phrases of “and in that day” (Isaiah 12:4, NRSV), and “the days will come” (Luke 21:6), of the un-remembering of “former things” and the creation of “new heavens” (Isaiah 65:17). The second letter to the Thessalonians - and even more so Luke’s Gospel - throw us into a time warp. While they surely point to an anticipated not-yet, there is still something left to do in the already: communal work for the Thessalonians, bold testimony for the Lukan disciples. In this way, the readings are not strictly apocalyptic as much as they are an exhortation about how believers ought to behave in the here and now: to behold, to believe, to be here, and to be ready.

Isaiah 65:17-25 - Behold

In the original Hebrew, our first passage from Isaiah (65:17-25) opens with the proclamation, “For, *behold*, I am about to create new heavens”. While some translations, such as the King James Version (KJV), retain the interjection “behold”, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) leaves it out—and very much to our loss. For implied in this word (*binneh*, behold) is a sense of here-and-nowness that defies time, of being present to something about to become. Whenever “behold” shows up in the Bible, it is heralding the inbreaking of the not-yet, alerting its listener or reader to be here, to be present—and to be ready. And in this passage from Isaiah, those who behold catch a glimpse of God’s ultimate promise and vision. Beholding is part of the joy and delight in such not-yet heavens and earth, part of its promise and its creation. Indeed, there is a remarkable promise at the heart of this passage, one that goes beyond our human understanding of the already and the not-yet: “Before they call I will answer” God tenderly declares (65:24). Our not-yet is already God’s before.

- Where is God already at work in your life and the world around you?
- Where do you see the not-yet breaking into the already of your life?

Canticle 9 – Believe

Not to belabor the point, but the canticle (Isaiah 12:2-6) also begins with “behold” in its original language, again retained in the KJV and left out in the NRSV. While we read “Surely, it is God who saves me,” salvation was originally—and still is—something more rightly and more deeply meant to behold. This passage from Isaiah is a hymn of praise and thanksgiving, a natural response to beholding God’s salvific goodness. Beholding and believing are mutually beneficial, as the next part of the verse attests: “I will trust in him and not be afraid” (12:2b). In addition, if the canticle also included the first verse of Isaiah 12, a helpful parallelism between verses 1-3 and 4-6 would be more apparent; for each of these verse groupings begins with the phrase, “In that day”. Looking more closely at the grammar in the call to thanksgiving in

each of these parallels, we might also note that it is distinctly singular in the former and plural in the latter. In other words, the thanks to be given is both individual and communal, and in this way, the Holy One of Israel is fully recognized in the midst of the believing community.

- How does your community of faith reflect thanksgiving to God? How do you?
- How do you “ring out your joy” as a faithful believer?

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 – Be Here

It’s hard to imagine that Paul was not implying something more than simply paid labor in his exhortation to the Thessalonians. The Greek word translated here as “work” is used almost twenty times in the Pauline epistles, with various connotations. While the emphasis of this chapter of the letter is on idleness, the antonymic implications can just as easily include diligence and commitment as well as work and labor. If we consider the work and labor of Paul’s ministry, so clearly in service to proclaiming the Good News, and worthy of imitation (3:7, 9), work and idleness take on deeper meanings. In addition, the accompanying reminder of being in service to each other is typical of Paul’s theology; whatever the nature of the work to which he calls his readers and hearers, it is for each of them individually as well as communally, not unlike the individual and communal message of the canticle. “Be here and be diligent—together,” is the underlying message I hear in this passage. This is work in which believers surely do not “labor in vain” (Isaiah 65:23) but accomplishes that for which it is purposed. While belief in a new heaven and a new earth—in the return of Jesus—is paramount, Paul is reminding the Thessalonians (and us) that there’s still something left to do before we get to the beyond.

- What is the work you still have left to do this side of paradise? What will equip you for engaging in and fulfilling that work?
- What prevents or opposes you from proclaiming the Good News?

Luke 21:5-19 – Be Ready

While they may sound apocalyptic to our ears, the words of Jesus as they appear in this passage from Luke would have fallen on the Gospel’s original hearers not as a prediction but as a reminder. Luke was writing after the Temple had already fallen; he wasn’t prophesying, he was writing to and for a persecuted minority of beleaguered believers under the tyranny of Roman rule. The Temple had in fact been razed to the ground, not one stone left upon another. We must hear this Gospel passage in the context of unimaginable loss. Yet Jesus doesn’t seem to be as concerned about what the end time will look like and when it will be as he is about how his disciples will be in between the already and the not-yet. Neither imminence nor future transcendence is the point here; rather, faithful discipleship and testimony in the here and now. The point is that the present moment is an opportunity for bold testimony, for fortitude even in the face of adversity. Until that ultimate day which will eventually come, Jesus calls those who follow him to be ready, even as they—as we—steadfastly remain and remind.

- Where do you find hope in this passage?
- How do you or your faith community celebrate what God is doing outside the “beautiful stones” of your church building?

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