

Sermon for 13 November 2022 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Isaiah 65:17-15; Psalter (*insert, alternate leader and people*) Isaiah 12; 2

Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

“Endurance”

Just as last Sunday, known as All Saints Sunday, focused on the limits of individual human lives, so this Sunday and next concentrate on the end of all time as we know it.

Liturgically, we complete our annual focus on one of the three oldest of the four New Testament books known as Gospels. That means this Sunday and next Sunday are the last times we will read from the Book of Luke as our Gospel in the Sunday service.

Beyond that, as we have been noting in these last few Sundays, the texts all head in some way towards closure, and final purpose, and completion. Those of us who belong to the great traditions of annual cycles in worship thus have the opportunity of reflecting many times on what it means to start over, and to let go...two basic human experiences.

Today's first reading, from late in the hugely influential Book of Isaiah, both for Jews and Christians, has God insisting that beauty and goodness and harmony across all kinds of barriers will show up and endure. Precious assurance is available to every soul that trusts and works in this direction.

For the psalter lesson, the same great book of Isaiah is quoted in what was probably verse form when first written, for the people of Israel to say together, in days long before most could even read. Here we see the insistence on rightness in the way the Israelites thought, with a single God who spoke and acted like a human, with characteristics humans could identify with and a history of interacting with them that supported the trust the first reading described.

The third reading, known as the Epistle, or letter, from the days of the early Christians, reminds me of a job interview with a very candid supervisor. “If you work here, you’ll have assignments, and you’ll sink or swim depending on how you perform. I work, and so will you. Fair and square. Headed in the right direction. Clear and consistent.” Or as the last sentence puts it, “Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.”

And last, Luke goes all over the place in summing up. We can't take him literally, because he talks about last things and first things, and promises confidence on one side and loss of life on another His “everything will be all right” sounds like a mother encouraging a child going into the O.R.... So human, so loving, making us brave and scared all up and down the scale... He's been such a good story teller, with so many lovely portraits of prodigals and converting sinners and simple, trusting widows and convinced soldiers ... we trust, like we trusted Mother about the doctor ...

And the sum of it, as I felt it in choosing a title for this Sunday, is “endurance.” These are hard times. Be brave. I can’t help but apply it to this week’s life in our own country. It’s not as bad as it could have been. It can take three generations, and several elections, to get back to where we thought we were as a leading democracy. So head for the next goal. Watch those who behaved well, and learn to encourage and be like them. The joy, the truth, the encouragement, lies in the doing daily what comes home to you as right and true. I am so thankful, so impressed, I see so much that could be interesting to try next, and so many signs of solid ground.

Endurance. When you talk about last things, talk right. Steady. Solid. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray.