

Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.
Grace and Holy Trinity Church
Richmond, Virginia
Advent I
November 29, 2015

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Luke 21:25-36

Jesus said, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

There is this view out there...erroneous though it may be...that the God of the Old Testament is very different than the God of the New Testament. The OT God is one of vengeance. The NT God is one of love. This view has got it wrong. We believe in one God and the God of the Bible is the God of both Testaments. The God of the OT is the God and Father of Jesus, the Messiah, our Lord. Never forget...for Jesus, the only Bible was what we call the OT.

Now, there is a lot of history, time and cultures covered in the Scripture on the Old Testament. The NT writings happened in a couple of generations. The OT covers thousands of years. Things develop and change. There is a rich variety of perspectives, debates and conversations going on. And always, the context is important.

Just one instance, there is a passage that we sometimes find difficult and as evidence for a God of vengeance. “Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise. “ (Ex 21:24) This was actually a move in a positive direction, given the context. It put limits on the violence. Ancient society didn’t have the “luxury” of incarcerating people, feeding them and guarding them, so other arrangements had to be made.

You see what typically happened was an escalation of the violence. You put out my eye...I put out both of your eyes. Then your family comes, puts out my other eye and cuts off an arm. Then my family comes to you...well you get the picture! And eye for an eye limited the violence. Which was a good thing.

Jesus starts from there, and continues to move even further in the same direction. “You have heard...an eye for an eye a tooth for a tooth. But what I tell you is this: Do not resist those who wrong you. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him the other also...If someone in authority presses you into service for one mile, go with him two.” (Mt 5:38)

Jesus takes the standard practice, which limited violence, and calls for something that has the potential to de-escalate the situation... break the cycle of violence completely.

This whole conversation devolves pretty quickly into a debate about the use of force versus pacifism...as though we must simplistically pick one or the other. If we go with violence, then everything goes. If we go with pacifism, then we must stand by and be doormats, let violent people kill the innocent.

However, as Pinchas Lapide, an orthodox Jewish commentator on the NT has said, what Jesus is talking about with turning the other cheek and walking the extra mile is a practical strategy. If you are walking with someone for two miles, there is the

possibility of conversation and reconciliation. If you turn other cheek, there is the possibility that the cycle of violence can be broken.¹

The point is, the followers of Jesus must always look for ways to break the tension, must look for ways to open the door to reconciliation, must always pray for the enemy, must always go the extra distance...creating a holy space where the Spirit of peace might grow.

We begin a new church year today with Advent. The season looks forward and it looks backward. It looks backward to the Incarnation of Jesus and prepares us to celebrate at Christmas the good news that God entered the world in a unique way in Jesus.

The season looks forward as well, to the last great Day, the Day of resurrection and justice, the day of the new creation.

Jesus' words in our gospel reading this morning had their origin in his prediction of the Temple destruction, which in fact happened in 70 of the Common Era. But these words have also been used in the gospel and in Christian tradition to point beyond that moment toward the last great Day. It ends with the challenge "Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

Part of being alert is that we don't give in to fear. Part of being alert is that we take seriously the promise of God in Jesus, that there will be a new creation, where death is no more and perfect justice reigns. Part of being alert is that we are Jesus People...and we live how he would have us live.

There is fear in the air because of the Paris attacks. Abdallah Saadi, whose two sisters were murdered in a French café on November 13, says, "The terrorists killed my sisters, and as Muslims we are double victims of these people because they create a hatred of Islam...these hooligans...are disgusting. What dignity? What heroism? They shoot a girl in the back."²

¹ "What Did Jesus Ask? The Sermon on the Mount: A Jewish Reading" trans. L. Swidler, *Christianity and Crisis* 42 (1982) 139-42.

² NYT A23 November 26, 2015 Article by Dan Bilefsky.

And in reaction, in some places the terrorists win, people respond as the grieving Abdallah Saadi feared they would...so for instance in NYC, a young female college student last week was spit upon, cursed at and told to go back to her country. Never mind that she was born in the United States of America and has lived in the United States of America all her life. She just happened to be Muslim.³

Or in Irving, Texas a group of people thought it would be a good idea to stand outside a Mosque with weapons as people were going to worship.⁴

People who react like this, must I think, make Jesus weep. But for us as Christians, terrorists are not our teachers... we will not live like them ... we will not act like them... we will not respond like them...with stupidity, prejudice and senseless violence. Jesus is our teacher and following him, we will not allow cowardly terrorists to define us.

Antoine Leiris, a man whose wife was killed in Paris, shows us the way of Jesus. I don't know his religious affiliation, but I think Jesus would be proud of him. Let me end by reading his words, an open letter to the people who killed his wife:

“On Friday night you stole the life of an exceptional being, the love of my life, the mother of my son, but you won't have my hatred.

I don't know who you are and I don't want to know - you are dead souls. If this God for which you kill indiscriminately made us in his own image, every bullet in the body of my wife will have been a wound in his heart.

So no, I don't give you the gift of hating you. You are asking for it but responding to hatred with anger would be giving in to the same ignorance that made you what you are.

You want me to be afraid, to view my fellow countrymen with mistrust, to sacrifice my freedom for security. You have lost.

I saw her this morning. Finally, after many nights and days of waiting. She was just as beautiful as when she left on Friday night, just as beautiful as when I fell hopelessly in love over 12 years ago.

³ NYT November 26, 2015, Page A 29 article by Kirk Semple

⁴ <http://thescoopblog.dallasnews.com/2015/11/armed-protesters-set-up-outside-islamic-center-of-irving.html/>

Of course I'm devastated with grief, I admit this small victory, but it will be short-lived. I know she will accompany us every day and that we will find ourselves in this paradise of free souls to which you'll never have access.

We are two, my son and I, but we are stronger than all the armies of the world. I don't have any more time to devote to you, I have to join Melvil who is waking up from his nap. He is barely 17-months-old. He will eat his meals as usual, and then we are going to play as usual, and for his whole life this little boy will threaten you by being happy and free. Because no, you will not have his hatred either.⁵

To which I can only say, Amen.

⁵ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3322348/Father-wife-killed-Bataclan-gunmen-vows-not-hatred-says-17-month-old-son-insult-happiness-freedom-day-poignant-message.html>