

November 18, 2007

Twenty-fifth Sunday After Pentecost

“Providence in Horror”

Luke 21:5-28 (The lion’s share of the text is included in the sermon in italics.)

Sermon

Horror; An intense feeling of repugnance and fear, abhorrence. Providence; Divine care and guardianship. We don’t put these two ideas together, do we? We like providence. We associate it with good things. If you punch “Providence” into Mapquest on your computer, you come up with no less than ten different cities in the U.S. of that name. This time of year especially we think of providence in terms of our country and its beginnings. How God’s hand helped the pilgrims survive that first winter, how He prospered these United States so that we today can enjoy its wonderful bounty. We think of the providence of God as His healing and comforting us, taking away our pain and making us feel safe. When we think about God’s providence in our own lives, more than likely we come up with a memory of how something worked out for our benefit.

Horror, on the other hand, is something we associate with evil, not with God. Horror is all too real to us every time we turn on the news. We see atrocities today in Iraq, Darfur, Afghanistan and in our own streets, the slaughter of innocents without reason. Flip through any history book and you likely won’t get more than ten pages without the mention of some horror; the holocaust, the killing fields of Cambodia, Stalin’s Soviet Union, various slaughters of Native Americans, an unending stream of wars and atrocities as far back as history itself. And most of us can think of at least one personal horror in our lives—a memory we still recoil from today because of the severity of the tragedy. Yet in our minds I think we often try to compartmentalize God out of these events. We know that we have a loving, caring God, and we rightly attribute all good blessings to His providence. But disasters and horrors don’t fit with our picture of God so we mentally try to keep Him somehow out of it.

We’re not really allowed to do that with today’s Gospel text. Jesus speaks and horror and providence collide. There is no way to avoid it. Jesus speaks of something horrible, yet assures the listeners that it is part of God’s plan. And this isn’t just some far off apocalyptic future, it is a future to happen within the lifetime of many whom Jesus is speaking to and it is for us a history, an event much of which we can even assign a date to.

*"See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is at hand!' Do not go after them. And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once."*

*"Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of*

*you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives.*

*"But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled."*

Jesus here speaks of things that would take place within the next four decades, and we know they come true. In the book of Acts we read of the stoning of Stephen. We read of the persecution of Jesus' followers, some of which were led by Paul before his conversion to Christianity. We read then of Paul being persecuted and we know of his eventual martyrdom in Rome under Emperor Nero. We know Jerusalem was indeed surrounded by Roman armies in the year 70 AD and many of its residents fled to the mountains. Many false prophets and leaders claiming to be messiah split the Jews into factions which fought one another. Things got so bad in the besieged city that there were reported cases of starving mothers consuming their own offspring. Eventually it became a wholesale slaughter leaving hundreds of thousands of Jews dead, the city and temple utterly destroyed, and Israel no longer a nation, its people well on their way to being scattered as the prophets had long foretold. Indeed, it was a horror.

And yet Christ says it is God's providence, His divine plan being carried out. When horrible things are happening to Christ's disciples and they are being mocked and beaten and brought before worldly leaders, some of whom will put the disciples to death, does Jesus say it's a horror? No. Jesus says, *"This will be your opportunity to bear witness."* It's an opportunity, a chance to serve God. Jesus talks of how even the disciples own families are going to turn on them, and how some disciples will even be put to death because of it. So the followers of Jesus will die for Christ. Yet he says, *"But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives."*

You kind of get the impression Jesus, God, isn't looking at things the same way we do. And it can be real troubling, especially because there are some elements here that we can't just leave back in 70 AD, especially at the end of our reading.

*"And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory."*

"The Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." That doesn't sound like 70 AD. That sounds like the future. Our future. And while we look with anticipation and longing toward the return of Christ, all of this distress and nastiness and horror the precedes it is indeed scary. And we see plenty of horror in the world today and we wonder just how bad things are going to get for us. We see Christians suffering deadly persecution in other countries. We look across the Atlantic to Europe and see a massive decline in churchgoing and the rise of false religion. We even see some signs that things may be turning against Christians right here in our homeland, and we see the rise of cults in our midst. Add to all

that the tragedy and horror we may see in our own lives because of substance abuse, domestic violence, brutality in society somehow spilling into our homes, or simply disappointments and want or death and disease rearing its head in our families, and you may be tempted to focus on the horror. We may see only ugliness in the world and we can't seem to find God anywhere. Or if we do see Him, the face we are presented with doesn't seem that loving. The face He presents seems angry and vengeful.

God does indeed have such a face. But we aren't seeing it. You see, Jesus Christ already saw that face of God. He hung on the cross, innocent, yet forsaken by God. The horror was poured out on Him in bucket loads. God's wrath for every rebellion and every wrong done or thought by every man and every woman was focused on the Christ who deserved none of it. The world is a horror, but not just parts of it. By God's standard the entire creation fell into an evil horror in Eden. God's providence is at work through Christ in the midst of it, saving you and I, a mankind that doesn't deserve it. The perfect Son of God willingly stepped into this world steeped in horror and willingly received the worst that both mankind and a righteous and wrathful God could bring down on Him, and He did it for us. And through His resurrection and the sending of His Holy Spirit we see His redemption still being effective 2000 years later.

We see it working today. Two children will be baptized. Two souls will be claimed from the horror that has become the world to the kingdom that is life eternal. We'll take the very body and blood of the perfect and eternal Christ into ourselves, to purify us from sin and sustain us through the horrors of this world to His eternity prepared for us.

Maybe it is because we are still so yet linked with this fallen world that we often almost unwillingly focus on the horrors, even the ones in the Bible. Don't. The Word speaks through the horror of the sinful world to the grace that brings us out of it. God, in His providence, has chosen you for eternity. Someday, be it through Christ's glorious return tomorrow or through the dying an earthly death in the many horrible ways it can happen to our frail and fragile bodies, we will live with not a hair on our head having perished. Every day that passes more and more and more people are being saved. The glorious kingdom of God is growing all around you. God is at work and someday it will come to completion in each one of us. Trust God. Trust that Christ suffered the horror meant for us on the cross so we don't have to face it in eternity. When you look around your life and your world, whether what you see delights you or revolts you, the fact remains. God is at work. You are His. Nothing is so horrible that it can separate you from His providence, His loving care. *"Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."*