
Working out God's Purpose

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 1 December 2024

Jeremiah 33:14-16 • 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 • Luke 21:25-36



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Happy new year! The church year begins today. The first Sunday in Advent begins the countdown to the birth of the baby Jesus. It is appropriate that we begin the year with Jesus's birth, for with his birth came also the birth of our hopes for life, for eternal life in him, and the beginning of the end of the power of death. Death has no power any longer, since Jesus died on the cross and rose again. But I'm getting ahead of the story! Let's stay with Jesus's birth for these four weeks, and then we'll think about the end of his days on earth!

At least I'd like to do that, to keep the birth and the death separate, so we can look at them one at a time; but the birth includes the death. The beginning always includes at least a hint of the end. At our baptism service, usually used with babies (although not always), the priest speaks of Jesus's own baptism, and then in the same breath, tells of how he died to set us free. Jesus's own birth was attended by

the threat of death, as Matthew tells us; Herod was on the trail of the Wise Men in hopes of finding and destroying the baby Messiah.

And today, in our Gospel, the adult Jesus, already in Jerusalem, the city where he meets his death, speaks about the destruction of Jerusalem, and indeed the end of the world as we know it. The signs are terrible and frightening: wars and insurrections, nation against nation, earthquakes, and all the rest of it. It is tempting to see Jesus's prophecy in the events of today. We have the plague of COVID; we have the threat of rising sea levels; we have earthquakes and giant storms; we have wars in the Middle East and Europe. The threat from terrorism is real and seems to be growing, among people whose god sometimes seems unrecognisable.

If terrorism and earthquakes and all the other terrible things we see today are the harbingers of the end of the world, then we would have to accept that they are part of God's plan. This passage from Luke which we're talking about today is clearly a prophecy of what God will bring about, relayed to us by God's own son. So if we identify today's events as the signs Jesus was talking about, then we're saying that this is how God ultimately wants the world to end, and here we are in the end-times. Are we ready to say that? And if today's events are the terrible events which Jesus foresaw, should we just sit back and wait for the end to come?

I see this a bit differently. Jesus says that the Son of Man will come "in a cloud with power and great glory" and that, if we are strong, we will "stand before the Son of Man" as our "redemption is drawing near." (Luke 21: 27-28, 36) This can only mean the coming of the kingdom of heaven, when God draws together all people then alive and all who have gone before, and creates the peaceable kingdom, so well described by Isaiah:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them ...

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11: 6, 9)

This is the kingdom of God, to be finally realised on earth. Life will then be as God intended it for the creatures he loves, human and animal. Death will be no more, and love will have gained its final victory.

God knew when he created us and all the other animals that we weren't perfect. He didn't intend to create perfect beings; he created beings in order to love them. He created us to turn towards him in love, and that is God's greatest joy — ours, too! For if we are in a state of perfect love with God, we are as perfect as we can be. We almost didn't make it: God sent the great flood to wipe us out. As it says in Genesis 6:

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. (Genesis 6: 5-6)

But we survived that one, thanks to God providing for Noah and his wife and sons. God gave us another chance, and is looking to see how we do this time. Since we're human, we will fight and destroy and kill each other for ridiculous reasons, as we seem to do so well — but we will also learn. You see, I believe the world will end not with wars and destruction, with floods and earthquakes, with nation against nation. I believe we will go through all those things, as we've been going through them for thousands of years now. But God wants us to learn to be peaceful, to help each other, and to live in harmony. Why else send his Son to teach us the ways of life and hope? If God intended just to let us destroy each other to the last man, why appeal to the wisdom and humanity God designed into us? I believe God wants to see us work out our peaceable kingdom here among ourselves, and he gives us every chance and help and guidance to do so.

Jesus's prophecy is true: nation will rise against nation, and terrible things will happen. But it's up to us, through and with God's inspiration, to bring peace to this world. Only then, only when God has worked out his peace through us, will the Son of Man come again to establish the kingdom of heaven here among us.

That's a much more challenging scenario, and it puts the onus on us to follow Jesus's teachings of peace and to spread them to all people. We must not only be ready for the coming of Christ, alert for the signs in the sky, but we must have used God's gifts of wisdom and love to make this world into a heaven on earth. We can no longer ignore the sufferings of people half a world away, because it takes all of us together living in peace to make this a peaceful world, and to show to our God that we have learned the lessons Jesus taught us.

Can we do it? I think we can, for I just cannot imagine God's faith being misplaced. God knows us through and through, and wants us to succeed, through his great love for us — greater love than we can ever imagine, for which we give thanks. Amen.