

In The Meantime

Every generation, at some point in its history, has thought its time was the end of time - and the twenty-first century has been no exception. The current generation can reflect upon experiences of war, natural disaster and political chaos as fodder for apocalyptic - or end time possibility.

Most of us can remember where we were and what we were doing on September 11th, 2001 when nineteen terrorists associated with Al-Qaeda hijacked four commercial airline jets or on December 26th, 2004 as the world woke to a tsunami in Indonesia - one of the deadliest natural disasters in history. Many people have vivid memories of news footage from New Orleans during and after Hurricane Katrina. And the sight of oil-soaked birds and marine life from the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico will remain a troubling reminder of how vulnerable our world is to such disasters happening again. And this year - the devastating earthquakes in Haiti, Chile and Pakistan remind us that it's a scary world we're living in right now.

So - in our gospel reading - when Jesus talks about "*nation rising against nation, and great earthquakes, famines and calamities in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven*" - we have some idea about the kinds of things he is talking about. Scholars refer to this chapter of Luke as *apocalyptic* - apocalyptic in the sense that at the time Luke wrote - probably sometime after 70 AD - terrible things were happening around him, and many thought the end of the world was imminent. The Roman Empire had swept in to Jerusalem - destroying the Temple, killing many insurrectionists - and leaving only rubble and devastation in their wake. This was also the time of the terrible persecutions against the early Christian believers. From the vantage point of Luke - who wrote this gospel - the world was collapsing all around him.

In our reading for today - Jesus, in reference to the Temple - talks about the time when not one stone will be left on another. The people of Luke's day - living some 40 years after the death of Jesus - witnessed the reality of that. And so have we in our own day witnessed the stones of our civilization falling one by one. Things are changing - the world is not as it was even ten, twenty, thirty years ago. Those things we thought we could count on to bring us a sense of stability and safety have been swept away. And we - like the people of Luke's day, during the First Century - find ourselves living in a time of uncertainty and confusion. What **has** been is gone or is no longer valid in many cases - and what **will** happen in the future is impossible to predict. We live in that in-between time of unknowing. And it's not a comfortable place, is it?! The thought that the job we counted on to support ourselves and our families could suddenly be ended - is frightening, to say the least. Or that the relationships we thought were so secure, could be broken. And God only knows what is happening in our churches!

So - how do we cope and live in 'the meantime'? In our reading today from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians - he addresses some of those same questions. There were many - Paul included - who felt that the Second Coming of Christ - and the end of the world - was imminent, and could happen at any time. And the response of some was to simply sit down and wait for it to happen.

Unfortunately - in the meantime - that meant that those who continued to carry on working and going about their lives - also ended up shouldering the tasks of those who had withdrawn from life. Paul's advice? Yes - the Second Coming might be imminent - but *in the meantime* they were to keep on keeping on - living their lives and contributing to the best of their ability.

Living 'in the meantime' is not easy. When we find ourselves in that time of unknowing - of limbo - when one thing has ended and before another begins - it's hard to know how to cope. When all that surrounds us are questions with no easy answers, when door after door shuts in our faces, when planning seems impossible because the future is dark and shadowy, when the signposts and landmarks we have counted on to guide us through are no longer there - how are we to respond? How do we go about the task of 'keeping on keeping on' - of rebuilding our lives from the rubble of the present in which we find ourselves? And how do we keep our faith 'in the meantime' - when we have cried to the heavens for guidance or answers, and God seems strangely silent?

I, too, like most of you here - have found myself in that place of confusion and limbo at various points in my life - and I don't have pat answers to give you this morning. But I do know of some things that have worked for me in the past in helping to cope 'in the meantime' - and of rebuilding life from the rubble of a world that has collapsed all around.

The first is - **begin with what you have**. Look at what you have. Never mind what's crumbled - never mind what the future will hold. Look at what you have. I recently read in a book of a man who was traveling in Dublin, Ireland. He woke up very angry because the people at the desk were supposed to wake him up half an hour earlier - and they didn't. "*To add insult to injury,*" he said, "*I was further irritated when room service delivered scrambled eggs and bacon when I had ordered boiled eggs and toast. And they gave me the 'Irish Times' instead of the newspaper I wanted. So I picked up the phone and complained to the desk. And the desk clerk, in her typical lovely Irish way, responded, 'Well, now,' she said, 'you're awake, aren't you? You've got something to eat and something to read while you eat. I'd say that you're not so badly off now, are you?!'*" Look at what you have - not at what you've lost, or wish was there. The first step in coping 'in the meantime' - of rebuilding your world is to look to God. Look at what - by God's grace - you have.

The second step is to **look at what is possible**. When Glenn Cunningham was only 7 years old, his legs were so badly damaged that the doctors considered amputation. At the last minute, they decided against it. And one of the doctors patted Glenn's shoulder and said, "*When the weather gets warm, we'll get you in a chair and you can sit on the porch.*" But Glenn said, "*No sir - I don't want to sit on the porch. I want to walk and I want to run - and I will!*" The doctor just shook his head, and walked away sadly. Well - 2 years later - Glenn was running. He wasn't running fast - but he was running. And eventually, Glenn went to college - and his extracurricular activity was track. He was running not only to prove the doctors wrong - but because he soon became very good at it. And the intercollegiate records began to fall beneath his driving legs. Then came the Berlin Olympics. Glenn not only qualified - but broke the Olympic record for the 1500 meter race. And the following year, Glenn broke the indoor mile record. The boy who wasn't supposed to walk again became the fastest man of his day. The second step to coping 'in the meantime' - is to explore what is possible - with God's help.

And the third step is to **look at what can be done**. In 1930, a traveler was exploring the French Alps - and he came upon a vast stretch of barren land. It was completely empty, ugly and desolate - the kind of place you stay away from. And then suddenly - the traveler stopped in his tracks. In the middle of this vast wasteland was a bent-over old man. He was walking along with a four foot pipe. Every few feet, he would stamp the pipe in the ground and then drop some acorns into the holes. The traveler stopped to speak with him - and the old man told him, "*I planted over a hundred thousand acorns. Perhaps only a tenth of them will survive.*" And then the traveler learned that the old man's wife had died, and that his son also had been killed in a tragic accident. And the old man - instead of living out the rest of his life withdrawn and sad - decided that he wanted to spend his last days doing something creative and good. He said, "I want to do something useful." Well - 35 years later - that same traveler went back to the spot where he had met the old man - and he could hardly believe his eyes. What he saw just amazed him. The land was covered with a beautiful forest. Birds were in the trees, and wildlife was evident roaming about. It was a magnificent sight - a miracle of the transformation of a barren wasteland. And all because someone cared - and had the vision of what was possible.

When we are living 'in the meantime' - when our lives are in the midst of change, and we find ourselves in a wasteland of unanswered questions and confusion about the future - we need to be able to look at what is possible - to have a vision of hope for ourselves and our world - and then to live it into reality. Alice Walker, the writer of '*The Colour Purple*', once said, "To the extent that it is possible - you must live in the world today as you wish everyone to live in the world to come. Otherwise, the world you want will never be formed." And that is so true on both a global and a personal level.

In the meantime - when next we find ourselves in a state of limbo and confusion - with unanswered questions and uncertainty swirling all around us - perhaps we will be better able to cope if we first of all look at what we have rather than what we have lost or left behind; then 'keep on keeping on' while exploring the possible; and finally - have a vision and live it into reality, with God's help. May God give us grace