

Pentecost 25
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"These are the days of miracle and wonder..." Paul Simon sang these words in the opening song of his album *Graceland*. Most of us would agree that there is no one alive today who has not tumbled around in the kaleidoscope of change. New forms of communication, new modes of transportation, expression, fashions, new drugs, new treatments, new hopes and new fears: all impact our lives. We live in interesting times which can be a blessing or a cause of stress.

There is underlying anxiety in these days of miracle and wonder, for they are also the days of death and destruction. With all we have, there is also a sense of loss. There is a longing for meaning and a desire to know what the future holds.

A few years ago Elaine and I attended a conference in New Orleans. Like most visitors to the city we enjoyed walking around taking in the sights and sounds as we made our way to Cafe Du Monde to enjoy a world famous coffee and beignets. Every few feet there was another artist, musician or fortune teller vying for the attention of passers by. Often there was a person with hand outstretched watching and listening intently as the teller used cards, a crystal ball or lines on the hand to look into the future.

I suppose wanting to know what the future holds is a normal human desire. Think of the advantages we could have if we knew the future. What if the investment committee of this parish could know how the stock market was going to do tomorrow? Or if you knew and could prepare for the next natural disaster, so you and those you care about could avoid it? What if you could somehow know the fate of another person so you could intervene for the better? It would be pretty awesome, wouldn't it?

It is not surprising that the folks listening to Jesus in the appointed reading from Luke's Gospel wanted to know when this catastrophe he described was going to happen.

We want to know the same thing today. One of the most popular book series of all time is the Left Behind series. I read somewhere that the books had sold over 60 million copies. These novels have everything in them: mystery,

adventure, a villain, heroes, intrigue and more. What makes this series so popular is that it takes literally this passage and others like it that describe the end times. To quote promotional literature, "people with inquiring minds want to know."

I want to suggest to you that Jesus is not describing the end time. In fact, I challenge you to find the Rapture in the Bible. I do not believe Jesus is even describing the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD. I think Jesus is talking about something more profound and much more important to all of us. Jesus was telling those listening to him on that day and those of us listening today, that the promises made by God and represented by the temple are going to be fulfilled. Things may not happen just as we imagine but God will make good the promises of restoration.

God is going to restore the kingdom all right but the temple will not be needed any more neither will an army be part of the restoration process. Jesus says to the people gathered outside the temple, "Give up your ideas of how God is going to establish the kingdom on this earth, this image of a sovereign nation for all the world to look up to. The kingdom of God is about turning the other cheek, going the second mile, losing your life in order to gain life, loving your enemies, forgiving those who do evil to you and not returning evil for evil."

What was so hard to understand, and still is difficult today, is that Jesus is talking about breaking away from convention. Jesus is saying, "Sing to the Lord a new song for God has won the victory." It is not going to be any easy thing. There will be arrests and persecutions, even Jesus' own. Those who follow Jesus and live into Kingdom values will find themselves betrayed by their own families. They may even face death.

Why? They will face difficulties for the same reasons that Jesus was hated. Jesus hung out with sinners and announced they are part of God's kingdom too. Jesus told people their sins were forgiven, reached out a healing touch leaving the temple out of loop. Jesus changed the rules of the game and change is hard to take.

Ultimately, Jesus offered a challenge to the religious establishment of his day by turning convention on its heads. To follow Jesus was to accept this risky, perhaps even deadly vocation to be a light in the world that prefers darkness.

I believe Jesus does the same thing to those of us who choose to follow him in the world today. He challenges us to rethink our agendas and our narrow views of who

can be loved by God. Jesus seemed very comfortable being with people who were declared sinful. He ate in their homes and engaged them in meaningful conversation. Jesus prayed with people you would not expect to find in the temple and offered them compassionate healing. His lifestyle clearly shows us that God has a special concern for the poor and the disadvantaged. God is pleased when we out of our wealth are generous but his model for generosity is a poor widow who gives not from her abundance but her poverty. Jesus heals the sick and does not look upon them as defective. He tells those who follow him to sheath the sword and not seek retaliation for perceived wrongs. He nurtures the faithful follower. When Peter betrays Jesus, he is forgiven and assigned a greater mission. When his closest followers scatter after his death he calls to them across the lake and invites them to breakfast. Everything he does is counter to conventional wisdom and the religious practices of his day.

As I said earlier, the desire to want to know the future is natural. We want to know what is going to happen in the Episcopal Church with threats of parishes, dioceses leaving to forge their own way amidst controversy over who can be called to be leaders. We want to know how stable our economy really is with more and more jobs being shipped out to China, Mexico and beyond. We want to know how many more young men and women will lose their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan before the war is declared over. We want to know if global warming is true and if so what is the real impact apart from politics. It is natural and normal to want to know.

Do you really want to know our future, we who take seriously the life, death and resurrection of Jesus? Well, I believe our future is just as Jesus described it that day to those listening as he stood outside the temple. If we are faithful to his radical agenda of unconditional love, compassion, acceptance and forgiveness then we will be dismissed, misunderstood and ignored. We may be reviled, rejected, betrayed and even hated. At the very worst, we will be killed for our beliefs and actions.

Life as a follower of Jesus in God's kingdom is not easy. We are going to feel disillusioned at times. We are going to grow weary and even be afraid. Some people will leave. Some people will refuse to offer financial and moral support. We'll worry and talk about the impact of these things on our stability as a church and our mission in the world. Through it all we will always be invited to refocus and return to God's promise to be with us always.

Doing the right thing, the faithful thing, the Christ like thing is never easy but Jesus assures us, "by your endurance you will gain your soul." Amen

