

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 18

November 15, 2009

St. Ann's Church, Old Lyme CT

Daniel 12:1-3

Psalm 16

Hebrews 10:11-25

Mark 13:1-8

SERMON:

We're closing in on the end of the church year. One Sunday remains after today—next Sunday is the last Sunday after Pentecost, and then, on Sunday, November 29th, we will move into Advent, the great season of preparation for our wonderful celebrations of Christmas—The Incarnation—and the beginning of a new church year.

The passages assigned for this week and next begin to move away from the focus we've been working with since way back last spring—our focus has been on the mission and ministry of the church-us--as the body of Christ at work in the world doing all those things which Jesus would be doing were he here in the flesh as well as the Spirit. We are the body of Christ.

For the last six months, our readings from scripture have attempted to encourage and cajole us to be the children of God in an immeasurably difficult world. Now, with the coming of Advent and our celebrations for the incarnation, our vision will be lifted slightly, our horizons will be widened and expanded. We have been focusing on the world and this age. Now we begin to focus on the kingdom of God and eternity. That's a major shift.

The Church does not ask us to make a radical shift. The organizers of the lectionary are too wise to expect or insist that we do that. Our eyes and expectations are raised this week with Mark's account of Jesus' preparations of his dearest disciples for the difficult times to come as the world adjusts to the presence of God's community, the church, in its midst.

In times of change, Jesus tells his disciples you can expect trials and tribulations, upheaval and difficulty. Events will take on a different significance than would have been the case in ordinary times. Solid ground will feel slippery under foot, that which was perceived with clarity will seem to be obscured and clouded.

"Do not despair," says Jesus, this is what you must expect in times of change. When you hear rumors and speculations, do not be alarmed. All this must take place before the new replaces the old.

This advice, given to his beloved disciples in a time of great change, is good advice for us in this time of transition and renewal which we are moving through as we seek a new rector to pilot the ship of the church over the shoals.

It is with calm expectation that the church is encouraged to await the changes to come. Hope is our hallmark. We live in tranquility and with peace. This is our character and temperament. It is the manner in which we order our lives together as we prepare, as we wait in expectation with hope.

Jesus felt it necessary to warn his disciples that false prophets would rise up in the community, false prophets who would take advantage of the upset of the moment to lead the community down wrong paths. We too must be careful not to allow ourselves to be led astray by those who might try to take advantage of the anxiety and disquiet we experience

in a time of transition. Just because we are encouraged to live lives of hope and anticipation (Advent themes) doesn't mean we have to be stupid and inactive.

Olivia Judson writes a column for the New York Times' website. She lives in London. She's a scientist—genes, I think, but I don't know for sure. I'm unscientific. When I hear the word, "jeans," I think about Levi's or Wranglers, not RNA or DNA. In a recent column, she wrote about the recent research that been done to understand better the changes that ripple through communities. The research has begun to show that it's not just the flu and chicken pox that can be spread from person to person.

"Studies have found," writes Olivia Johnson, "that one person's change in behavior ripples through his or her friends, family, and acquaintances. If one of your friends becomes happy for example, you're more likely to become happy too."

Behavior and attitude is catching. Mark knew that two thousand years ago when he wrote the Gospel. "Then Jesus began to say to them, 'Beware that no one leads you astray.'" There's our warning, and our response is confidence and hope and clarity of thinking and abiding faith that God is working on our behalf. We can be confident in God's hopes for us, and not allow ourselves to be lead astray

Dwight L. Moody was one of the first of the great popular American evangelists. He lived just up the road, up in Northampton, Massachusetts. The Northfield School for Girls and the Mount Hermon Academy for boys were two of his many, many projects. Dwight Moody was a remarkable preacher. He was the Billy Graham of his age, and, in fact, Billy Graham patterned his ministry on Moody's. He inspired hundreds of thousands, perhaps million of people over the time he was active and that was in the middle of nineteenth century, long before mass media and monstrous stadiums.

Moody's great gift was his ability to turn an ordinary event into a teaching about faith—a parable. One day, Moody read a story in the newspaper about a shipwreck off the port of Cleveland, Ohio. He took the bare facts of that story and turned it into one of that earlier century's great sermon illustrations.

"On a dark and stormy night, when the waves rolled like mountains and not a star was to be seen, a boat, rocking and plunging, neared the Cleveland harbor. 'Are you sure this is Cleveland?' asked the captain, seeing only one light from the lighthouse. 'Quite sure, sir,' replied the pilot.

"Where are the lower lights?"

(Those would have been the lights of the houses and stores along the shore.)

"Gone out sir.'

"Can you make the harbor?"

"We must or perish, sir.

"With a strong hand and a brave heart the old pilot turned the wheel. But, alas, in the darkness he missed the channel and with a crash upon the rocks the boat was shattered and many a life lost in a watery grave."

Now Moody makes his point!

"Brothers and sisters, the Master will take care of the great lighthouse; let us keep the lower lights burning!"

Philip Paul Bliss, author of many, many gospel and evangelical hymns (but none in the Episcopal collection—perhaps, not our style) was moved to write a hymn when he heard Moody's sermon. A couple of verses go like this:

*Brightly beams our Father's mercy
From his lighthouse evermore;
But to us He gives the keeping
Of the lights along the shore.*

*Let the lower light be burning!
Send a gleam across the wave;
Some poor fainting, struggling seaman
You may rescue, you may save.*

A wonderful echo from a different age: it's what people mean when they say, "We ought to sing the old hymns more often."

During a time of transition—we must keep the lower lights burning. God will take care of the lighthouse. We must not allow ourselves to be led astray, and we must anticipate with joy our future with God's in faith and with hope.

Keep the lower lights burning!