

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA**

November 13, 2022—PENTECOST 23/PROPER 28, YR. C

The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Sermon: *“Doing What’s Right, Until Jesus Returns”\**

Malachi 3:13—4:2a, 5-6	(God keeps a record of those who revere Him)
Psalms 98	(Sing and make music, praising God for His wonderful works and deeds)
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13	(We are not to grow tired of doing right)
St. Luke 21:5-19	(Jesus prophesies about the End Times)

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With the Church year coming to a close, today’s Lectionary lessons are turning our attention toward the “End Times,” when Christ will come again. In light of this promised reality, “Let’s get our priorities straight!” seems to be the message of this morning’s Scripture readings. Passages such as these challenge Christians in our postmodern lives. We ask ourselves: How are we to understand and live according to the ancient sense of urgency they contain?<sup>1</sup>

In Malachi and Luke, the message of “the great and terrible day of the Lord” is clearly spelled out as a time of destruction—for those who have not followed the ways of God. Malachi paints a picture of the wicked being burned up as a farmer incinerates stubble in his field. And St. Luke gives us an image of tremendous political, natural, and cosmic upheaval: “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and signs from heaven.”

If you’ve been following the news about the war in Ukraine; the horrifying violence in Afghanistan and the Sudan; along with the devastation wrought by Florida’s Hurricane Ian; the summer drought and brutal heat waves in Europe; and the catastrophic monsoon flooding in Pakistan, this prophecy sounds as though it is referring to our time.

But sadly, these words have sounded the same to every age that has heard them. For those who decided theirs was the last age, gave up their homes, property, and even their families, and went up on mountaintops to greet the Lord, disappointment was their only reward. Let’s face it: the world is not going to end, or will Jesus return, when we think it will happen!

On the other hand, those who have concluded that biblical prophecy is not a reliable clue to the process of history, especially when it comes to the end of the world, tend to disregard what the Bible says, altogether. That’s because Scriptural threats against evildoers that haven’t panned out begin to sound like the old story of the boy who cried “Wolf!” too many times: Folks have stopped listening. They’ve realized they can get away with anything and everything, since no lightning bolt from heaven has struck them. .... Yet.

So the question is: How is God speaking to us through the Scripture readings we’ve heard today, about living out our faith and devotion to Jesus Christ until He returns to call us home? St. Paul provides some helpful insight in his second letter to the Thessalonians. If you read both of his letters to the church in Greece, you learn that today’s passage is part of a bigger picture in which the Apostle wrote compellingly about the Second Coming of Christ and the final judgment of the world.

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul says: “Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, ‘Peace and safety,’ destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape” (1 Thess. 5:1-3, NIV).

Apparently, some of his readers thought the imminence of the Lord’s return excused them from ever working again. They became, as Paul describes them in today’s passage, “mere busybodies; not doing any work” at all. Obviously, this was a misunderstanding of what he was trying to communicate.

In contrast to doing nothing, while sitting around just waiting for the final judgment, the Apostle offers his own life and ministry as a guideline. St. Paul worked tirelessly to spread the Gospel, and he established many churches, supporting himself as he went about teaching and preaching. With every convert he led to Christ, the dominance of earthly powers was challenged.

So, for Paul, the best way to prepare for Our Lord's return was to build up Christ's Kingdom on earth, populated by baptized, mission-minded, believers. For those living in this alternative kingdom which is Christ's Church, Paul's envisioned a renewed humanity, as he writes in 2 Thessalonians 2:14, one in which we "share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." What is primary about the glory of Jesus Christ is that it does not share in the glory of any earthly kingdom, all of which are subject to corruption, abuses of power, and temporary duration.

For Christians to claim Jesus as Lord means that our ultimate trust is not in the supremacy or authority of any earthly ruler or power. That is why Paul worked hard to equip believers to stand up against the arrogant claims of both the Roman emperors or their regional puppets. Instead, Christians were urged to claim citizenship in the larger, all-encompassing realm of God's love.

To be different in the world, Paul teaches, means that we must cultivate what is truly important, what is most valuable according to God's standards—not ours. In doing this, Paul stresses, we are not to give up on everyday life even when we are unsure about the future. It is this very sense of uncertainty that can help point us toward what is most important. It also gives us a sense of urgency that can help us to focus our spiritual lives.

So how do we discern what is unnecessary or trivial, versus what is essential and imperative? In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus urges His disciples, who are very concerned about what is to come, to remember three important things:<sup>2</sup>

First: We are not to be deceived into departing from the Truth. That means, everything we think, say, or do, should align with the teachings of God's Holy Word—and not what the world preaches and pushes. Our culture advocates that we must not only tolerate but also condone any and every kind of lifestyle, habit, or relationship. But God doesn't see it that way. For it is He who gave us the B.I.B.L.E.—Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth.

Second: We are not to be so afraid or anxious that we fail to be witnesses for Christ. If Jesus is coming back, and will make all things right—evil and unbelief will be punished, and goodness and faith will be rewarded—then what have we got to lose, by not telling people about Jesus, and what He has done for us, or is doing in our parish?

Third: We are not to be misguided into living as though this life is all there is. Our society would like for us to think that way, so that companies can sell us more and more stuff, and we can fill our lives up with more and more junk. Remember: We can't take it with us, we won't need it in heaven, and God will not care about or ask us about it.

So if that's true, then there's no point in piling up a lot of things we don't really need. Better to give most of it away, and turn our attention to those who have less than we do. All of this is about prioritizing our loves: Love of God, love of neighbor, love of self, and even love of our enemies—those who hate or discount us. This biblical demand for love requires our fullest attention, especially when so many other factors—people and institutions, media and secular values, clamor for our attention and allegiance.

Navigating all of this is not easy. Part of the problem is that we 21<sup>st</sup>-century Christians have been as lulled into complacency as was the 1<sup>st</sup>-century Church. We have become skeptical or even cynical about Christ returning and the reality of a Final Judgment. As a result, we slack off, and do not take seriously enough our sins, errors, and doubts.

However, both Jesus and St. Paul warn against this kind of spiritual laziness—the “stick my head in the sand” reaction—particularly, as a response to trying times. Jesus tells His disciples, “Do not be led astray,” and Paul writes: “Brothers and sisters, do not become weary of doing what is right.”

There’s no question, we are living in distressing times. In our Bible study class, we were discussing the possibility of these being the “end times”. One member asked, “If so, what does that mean for us?” I answered spontaneously, “We pray all the more fervently!”

Indeed, all that is happening around us should call us to passionate intercession for the world. And today’s lessons remind us to keep paying attention to what is important to God, remembering His invitation to radical, extravagant love, and the demands of justice.

None of this is to say that we should not take care of ourselves, too. We must still take “time out” to rest our bodies, minds, and spirits—and even laugh and play—in order to keep our hearts open and alive to God’s presence and guidance. And, if we remain close to Jesus, obeying His teachings and commands, Our Lord promises us at the end of today’s Gospel, “by your endurance, you will gain your souls.” So hang in there! Fasten your seat belts for the bumpy ride. But no matter what happens, God is with us—and we have each other—therefore, all shall be well. *Amen.*

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\* Adapt. N. George-Hacker, 17 November 2013, St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with Permission. /

<sup>1</sup> Adapt. Clark Berge, “Let’s Get Our Priorities Straight,” 18 November 2001, [EpiscopalChurch.org](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/lets-get-our-priorities-straight-proper-28-c-2001) < <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/lets-get-our-priorities-straight-proper-28-c-2001> > 7 November 2022. Used with permission.

<sup>2</sup> Adapt. John Hamby, “A Three-fold Warning,” 27 May 2003, [SermonCentral.com](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/a-three-fold-warning-john-hamby-sermon-on-second-coming-58585?page=1), < <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/a-three-fold-warning-john-hamby-sermon-on-second-coming-58585?page=1> > 7 November 2022.