

### 32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

**Haggai 1:15b-2:9; Psalm 145:1-5, 17-21; Psalm 98; Luke 20:27-38; II Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17**

**Haggai 1:15b-2:9.** The prophet Haggai was the first of the final three prophets of the Old Testament, Zechariah and Malachi being the other two. Haggai preached in 520 BCE, during the reign of Darius I, king of Persia. His message came at a time of real struggle for the Jews. The remnant from the Babylonian captivity had returned from exile, Zerubbabel ben-Shealtiel had been appointed by the Persian emperor as governor of the province of Judah and Joshua ben-Jehozadak had been named as the high priest. Both those who had returned from exile and those who had been living in the land struggled to wrest a living from the depleted soil, from the long-term drought under which they were living, and from impoverished living conditions. Everyone was so concentrating upon survival that they seemed to have little motivation to think of anything else.

Recognizing the grave threat of collapse that permeated the nation, Haggai called them to a common task to which they could all commit themselves – the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. As Solomon’s Temple was the center of all Jewish life before the Babylonian conquest, so this new temple could become the motivating force of this new Israel. Therefore, Haggai promised the people that if they would commit themselves to the restoration of the temple, then God would bless them for re-constructing a house of worship in which God could dwell, and would restore their economic and political might as a nation. This is the context for today’s Old Testament lesson

The prophecy begins, “In the second year of King Darius, in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Haggai, saying: “Speak now to Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say, “Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the Lord; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the Lord; work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear” (1:15b-2:5)”.

This word from God is delivered by the prophet Haggai one month after his initial call to them to begin work on the Temple (1:1). The people obeyed that call and had begun construction. But it was soon apparent to all that the temple they were constructing was inferior and far less grand than the one that Solomon had built close to 500 years earlier. There were those among them who could remember that former temple before it was razed by the invading Babylonians, and they could not help but contrast the splendor of that earlier temple with the paltry substitute the Jews could afford to build now. That recognition became discouraging to the people, and now they were lagging at their work.

But God challenges them to their task with the words spoken by his prophet, “Take courage; be strong” – the challenge is given to them three times. “Be strong, O Zerubbabel. Take courage, O Joshua. Be strong, O people”. The very way the message is worded denotes the definite and

unconditional nature of the command. Be absolutely determined to continue this project. Don't be waylaid in any way. Keep your eyes on the prize! Keep on keeping on!

And why? "I am with you! My spirit abides with you! I promised you! There is no reason to fear. Neither be fainthearted at the size of the task nor intimidated by the reality that you can't build a temple like Solomon's. I don't want you to build a temple like Solomon's. I want you to build your temple!"

Haggai then lifts the people's spirits by launching into the most poetic and powerful prophecy. "For thus says the Lord of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts. The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts, and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts" (vss. 6-9).

God declares through his prophet that it is only a little while and God will act to return the world to what God had originally intended the world to be. All nations (and not just Israel) will be shaken from their capture by commitments to domination, greed and power, and will experience transformation into the world as God created it to be. The wealth of the nations will flow to the poor of the world, as it flows also to Israel. And this "house", this temple will be filled not only with the splendor of that wealth, but also with the glory of the Lord (the Hebrew can be translated either as "splendor" or "glory"). So this temple that you now despise as being so much less worthy than Solomon's temple will someday become God's glorified temple of worship, a house of prayer for all peoples as the nations come to the light of God (Isaiah 2:3-5; 60:3).

Then comes the apex, the zenith of this magnificent prophecy. "The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts, and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts" (2:9). The Hebrew word translated "prosperity" in the NRSV is the word, "shalom". "In this place, I will give shalom, says the Lord of hosts". The Temple will become the abode of shalom – well-being, wholeness, prosperity, at-oneness, peace! Thus, the Temple – no matter how inconsequential it may seem to be in its construction – will be the symbol of God's blessing of shalom upon the whole earth, as all humanity, all society and even the environment itself will become one with God – the world as God intended it to be!

This was the dream with which Haggai left the people of Israel. Haggai's message was a call to Israel to rebuild the Temple, both to receive God's blessings upon their national life and to end their ennui as a people.

But did that dream reach its fulfillment upon Israel's completion of the Temple? The second of the final three Old Testament prophets, Zechariah, wrote near the completion of the Temple, continuing Haggai's dream. Zechariah told the people that with the Temple's dedication, God would begin to restore to Israel its fortunes of old, making Zerubbabel either the new Messiah or a foretaste of the Messiah. But the final prophet, Malachi, who wrote well after the Temple was completed but before Nehemiah became governor of Israel, saw it quite differently. He sees

Israel as having terribly failed their potential rebirth with the reinstitutionalization of the Temple, because the people were more committed to their own priorities than that of building a nation as God intended it to be. Adultery, perjury, intermarriage between pagans and Israelites, and the victimization of the poor were all being widely practiced by the Jews, he reported (3:5; 2:10-12). Most of all, even though the Temple had been rebuilt and formal Yahweh worship had resumed in the Temple, the people had by-and-large abandoned their religious traditions and practices which had earlier made them unique among all Eastern peoples (1:14; 2:13; 3:7-14). They believed God had abandoned them. And therefore, they abandoned God! So Haggai's dream of a people blessing the world through their worship and service of God, and bringing about the dramatic transformation of the world into the shalom community, would have to await the coming of another man of God. So, it is on this sad note that the Old Testament ends!

**Psalm 145:1-5, 17-21** are key verses within an acrostic poem. The opening word of each of the psalm's verses begins with a letter (in order) of the Hebrew alphabet, except for a missing *nun* (N). The poem is centered around a traditional Jewish prayer used primarily for grace at meals, "The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing" (vv. 15-16).

The psalm begins with the praise of God. "I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. Every day I will bless you, and praise your name forever and ever. Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable" (vv. 1-3).

The psalm then speaks of the kingdom over which this God rules. By doing so, the psalmist demonstrates how central a theology of the kingdom of God actually is throughout scripture. The psalmist writes, "Your faithful . . . shall speak of the glory of your kingdom, and tell of your power, to make known to all people your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations" (vv. 11-13).

The characteristics of God's kingdom are presented in a few very pithy and pointed comments. "The Lord is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings. The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desires of all who fear him; he also hears their cry, and saves them. The Lord watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy" (vv. 17-20).

The kingdom is not described in political or economic theory but by looking at the characteristics of God. God is just; therefore, his kingdom is just. God is kind; therefore, his kingdom treats people kindly. God is "near to all who call on him"; therefore, the structures and people of his kingdom care deeply about its people. God desires to call forth the best out of all his children; therefore, the people of the kingdom "hear the peoples cry, and saves them".

Intriguingly, this description of the kingdom begins and ends with justice. It begins with the clear statement that God "is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings" (vs. 17). A just God requires a just people and systems. But what is justice? "The Lord watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy" (vs. 20). What is described here is retributive justice.

What one metes out is what one will eventually receive. In God's kingdom, the punishment will always fit the crime. Thus, the kind of justice practiced by God will "do to you what you have done to others". So, be reflective about how you choose to act, for you will be judged by how you choose to judge! It is a very sobering instruction!

**Psalm 98** describes a messenger running from the field of battle with the good news that God, that nation's authentic king, has conquered the enemy. His message is followed by the blast of the trumpet, and the king himself approaches the city in triumphal procession. The city's people, of course, go wild with joy, as they praise both their victory as a nation and their God!

Actually, there are three dimensions of praise presented in Psalm 98. There is, first of all, the praise that human beings, both as individuals and as a people give to God (vv. 1-3). God's deliverance is perceived by the people as being a "new thing" deserving of a "new song". And that "new thing" that God has done is comprehensive in scope. God has acted to bring about a spiritual transformation through his mighty act ("he has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness"), but that transformation is also political ("he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations") and military in nature ("his right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory"). Thus, the great work that God has done in liberating his people has not solely been individualistic (although it has included this dimension), but is corporate and social as well, transforming the nation's political and military agenda as well as its spirituality.

Second, Psalm 98 presents God's work of human transformation not only as being praised by the people and nation (vss. 1-3). It is also praised by all the peoples of the earth. "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth: break forth into joyous song and sing praises. Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody. With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord" (vss. 4-6).

By stating that the "joyful noise" that is to be made to the Lord is to be undertaken by "all the earth", the psalmist is indicating that this transformation that God is doing is not for Israel alone, but is intended for the whole world. This is clearly stated in verse 3, "all the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God". Thus, what the Psalmist is presenting here is that God's salvific work is neither exclusively spiritual nor is it exclusively intended for Israel. Rather, it is "good news of great joy for all the people" bringing shalom "among those whom God favors".

The third level of praise moves beyond individuals, the people, Israel or even all the nations of the earth. The praise of God for God's transformative work is also to be taken up by nature itself! "Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity" (vss. 7-9).

Ancient Israelite thinking, like that of the nations around them, envisioned the world set upon chaos ("the roaring of the sea") that seeks to deny or overthrow God's dominance. But even chaos itself recognizes the great victory that has been won by God, so that just as humans have been redeemed and civilizations transformed politically, economically and socially by God's

saving work, so even nature is made new again as it becomes the world of shalom that God intended it to be.

Thus, the Psalm ends “God will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity”. The world itself – both the natural world and the human-built world – will be governed with *tsedeq* (here translated “righteousness”), the Psalmist tells us. And the people will be governed with *mesharim* (translated “equity” or “uprightness”). The nations (and even nature) will be governed by the conquering monarch-God in the new world God is creating, and they will be governed with compassionate and just treatment toward the poor (the meaning of the word *tsedeq*).<sup>1</sup> And the people will be governed by God with *mesharim* or with economic equity, so that everyone shares wealth and “there are no poor among you” (Deut. 15:4). This is the kind of kingdom God is creating as he conquers the forces of chaos and evil, and this is the kind of world in which he invites those who are called by him to live.

**Luke 20:27-38** is ostensibly a discussion between Jesus and some Sadducees on a question regarding the resurrection of people from the dead. In reality, however, it is a debate over the right understanding of the Law of Moses and the theology that lies behind one’s understanding and consequent actions on God’s intentions for Israelite society.

The text tells us that certain Sadducees, “who say there is no resurrection”, come to Jesus to ask him about his teaching on the resurrection. They do so by posing a question that is designed to reduce the concept of resurrection to absurdity!

In order to truly understand this confrontation, one must understand who the Sadducees were in ancient Israelite society. They are mentioned rarely in scripture; in fact, this passage is the only reference to them in the Gospel of Luke. None of their writings have survived and little is known of them, so that all that we know about them is what is recorded about them in the writings of those who opposed their teachings – the Pharisees (one’s enemies are always a dubious source for gaining a fair evaluation of one’s position). What we know of them is that they were the dominant religious group in Jesus’ day, making up Israel’s priesthood (Pharisees were not priests). All of the high priests in the first century A.D. were Sadducees. Since the priesthood was also the political power of Israel cooperating with Rome and managing the nation in conformity with that cooperation with Rome, and since the Temple was the center of Israel’s economic power as the nation, it was the Sadducees who were the supreme religious-political-economic leaders of the Israel of Jesus’ day.

The entire belief-structure of the Sadducees was built around an extremely strict and conservative reading of the Law of Moses (the Torah or the first five books of the Old Testament). They accepted no other book as scripture, for they believed that the authentic voice of God was known only through the voice of Moses. Their perception, therefore, was that what could not be demonstrated to be specifically stated in the Torah could not be believed. Through

---

<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew word *tsedeq* didn’t mean what the English word “righteousness” now means. “Righteousness” has a sense of acting in a morally right way. On the other hand, *tsedeq* is always used of nations and people in acting ethically and compassionately toward the poor.

a strict reading of the Law of Moses, the Sadducees could dominate the political, economic and religious landscape of Israel and control the thinking of the people.

As stated earlier, the Sadducees firmly held that unless one could clearly demonstrate from the Torah that a belief or conviction was taught in the Torah, one could not hold to it. This was particularly true of the concept of the resurrection of the dead – a belief to which all Pharisees held (including Jesus), but no Sadducees. Sadducees dismissed this doctrine because, although the reality of the resurrection can be clearly demonstrated from prophetic and poetry books of the Old Testament, it appears nowhere in the teachings of Moses (i.e., the first five books of the Old Testament). Consequently, since Moses nowhere directly taught the resurrection, the Sadducees contended that a faithful Jew could not hold to a belief in the resurrection of the dead. To be able to demonstrate otherwise would be to challenge the legitimacy of the Sadducees, not only to interpret the Law of Moses but to rule the nation (because they would be ruling the nation from a perspective that would be misinterpreting God’s intentions for Israel). Consequently, they could no longer be trusted with that responsibility. **This** is what is behind Jesus’ confrontation of the Sadducees in today’s Gospel Lesson.

The Sadducees “pick the fight” with Jesus, intending to discredit him before the people. They do so by presenting a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. “Teacher”, they said, “Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her” (20:28-33).

To make their argument, the Sadducees take advantage of the levirate marriage ordinance of the Law of Moses (Deut. 25:5-10; ex.-Gen. 38:6-11; Ruth 3:9-4:10). This legislation required the brother of a married Jew who died childless to marry his brother’s widow; the first son produced in this second marriage would become the heir of the deceased and would keep his name and heritage alive. This was the only way that the Sadducees understood “resurrection” to occur. By telling this story of seven brothers, none of whom could father a son by the widow of all of them, the Sadducees thought they were making nonsense of the doctrine of resurrection.

Jesus’ response is brilliant. He counters their attempt to make the doctrine look absurd by stating, “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marries nor is given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead but of the living; for to him all of them are alive” (vss. 34-38).

Jesus does three things in his rejoinder to the Sadducees. First, he demonstrates to them that they don’t know what they are talking about – that they can make fun of a doctrine like the resurrection because they are not spiritually discerning or sensitive enough to perceive its profundity. Jesus in essence answers, “You see the afterlife as being nothing more than an

extension of this life – the continuance of life and of society (including society’s norms and standards) as we know it here on earth. Suppose it’s something different! Marriage is not even a part of eternal life, for marriage exists in order to perpetuate and sustain humanity. And in heaven, you are “perpetuated” and sustained through your relationship with God and one another, not through marriage. Heaven is the ultimate of relationality – existence as God intended it to be. Therefore, you are like angels! Angels, by their very nature, are immortal and in eternal relationship with God (e.g., I Cor. 15:21-58). And so are those who respond to God’s grace here on earth and embrace God and their brothers and sisters here on earth.”

Second, in this passage, Jesus presents a very nuanced criticism of the Sadducees’ attitude toward women. Jesus’ argument presented here that liberates women is in conformity with Jesus’ attitude toward women that is exhibited throughout the Gospel of Luke. Women were one of the most helpless and “used” groups in Israelite society, especially if they were widowed (as was the woman – seven times over – in this story). One of the remarkable elements in Luke’s gospel is that Jesus pays particular attention to women, taking them seriously. Thus both the mother of Jesus and her cousin Elizabeth are given places of honor in the birth narrative. A “woman of the city, who was a sinner” is defended by Jesus before the Pharisees and forgiven of her sin (7:36-50). Most importantly, Jesus ministers to both Mary and Martha, and takes quite seriously Mary’s hunger after spirituality (10:38-42). In that story, Jesus commends Mary for choosing “that better part”, thus declaring that a woman could be Jesus’ disciple and therefore become a teacher of men and a practitioner of the gospel alongside Peter and James, Andrew and John (the traditional role for which a person would be discipled). Today’s Gospel Lesson is also a freeing of women despite the constraints of both Jewish and Roman societies.

The story told by the Sadducees to try to make the doctrine of the resurrection look ridiculous has one woman ending up marrying seven brothers, all of whom try vainly to impregnate her but fail. The assumption is that she neither approved nor desired this arrangement. The entire story is one of a woman “used” by the seven brothers in their futile attempt to produce an heir for the first brother. She is an object used to make a point, the levirate ordinance being both literally obeyed and ruthlessly carried out. This woman is taken by all seven men, and she is looked upon only as a baby-baring machine to satisfy the male ego to perpetuate the memory of the first brother!

In his rejoinder to the Sadducees, Jesus demands a profoundly different place for women (and, consequently, any marginalized or exploited). When he states, “those who are considered worthy of a place in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage”, Jesus actually uses (in Greek) not the passive voice (“given in marriage”), but the middle voice (“allow oneself to be married” or “consent to marriage”). That is, Jesus very subtly shifts the emphasis of the Sadducees from “taking a wife” (their words -- vv. 28, 29, 31) to including the woman as a decision-maker in regards to that marriage (“consent to marry”). Jesus changes the woman from object to participant! Jesus gives the widow in this story the right to choose whether or not she will participate in this arrangement. And this radical change in the place and rights of women occurs because God has worked through Jesus to move the world and the people of this world from “this age” to “that age”, the kingdom of the resurrection from the dead!

By responding in this way to the Sadducees, Jesus is contrasting their entire way of perceiving reality as being a society of domination with that of society as God intended it to be. The Sadducees can understand reality only as people pressed into a religious, political and economic system that keeps society ordered the way that it now operates, including women forced to conform to an unloving levirate legislation organized to use them in order to perpetuate the order as it currently is. Jesus, on the other hand, presents society as God intended it to be – a relational society in which no one is forced to act against their will and no one is objectified, but rather all live in a just, equitable and relational world of shalom. By his response, Jesus here undermines the levirate marriage ordinance, and by doing so, undermines a law used by the “powers that be” (including the Sadducees) to maintain control and dominance of the people.

But, third, Jesus also hoists the Sadducees on their own petard. He concludes his rebuttal of the Sadducees with the words, “And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive” (vss. 37-38).

Jesus, in essence, says to the Sadducees, “You don’t read the Torah very well, for you read it with undiscerning eyes, unable to perceive the depths of what is being said there in your fascination with salvaging all the rules. You are wrong when you say that the Law of Moses states nothing about the resurrection.” He then directly attributes to Moses the words of the Torah, “I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Exodus 3:6).

What Jesus is pointing out by referencing this scripture is that God speaks *in the present tense*. God does not say, “I was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” – that is, when they were alive, I was God to them. God said at the burning bush, “I am presently the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob”. I am still God to them.” And God could not still be God to these patriarchs of the faith unless *they still were alive!*

Through this argument, Jesus demonstrates to the Sadducees that their refusal to believe in the resurrection was due to their misreading of the Torah (just as virtually everything else for which they stood – such as levirate marriage – was championed by them in order to maintain domination of the people, institutions and systems of Israel). They had built their entire belief structure and their acting out of those beliefs to dominate their world on the premise that unless one could clearly demonstrate from the Torah that a belief or conviction was taught in the Torah, one could not hold to it. It was on that basis that they rejected the Pharisees doctrine of the resurrection (even though it was taught in other portions of the Old Testament). Well, now, Jesus had just demonstrated that Moses indeed taught the resurrection. What are you going to do about that, Sadducees?

Jesus’ defeat of the Sadducees with this argument was of great significance – and probably contributed directly to their decision to get him executed. Jesus had publicly humiliated them and, at the least, had exposed them as manipulators of the Law for their own ends. Jesus had publicly demonstrated that the Pharisees were wrong on their contention that Moses didn’t teach the resurrection. If they were wrong in that, how much more were they wrong about? Jesus’

defeat of the Sadducees in this confrontation challenged not only their interpretation of the Law of Moses but of the legitimacy of their rule of the nation. They had been exposed for the manipulators of the Law that they were, interpreting scripture to serve their own purposes and to maintain themselves in political, economic and religious power and authority in Israel, resulting in the oppression, exploitation and domination of the people for their own ends. They had been exposed! And they could never be trusted with the responsibility of ruling the nation ever again! That was what Jesus' confrontation of the Sadducees in today's Gospel Lesson is all about.

The moral of the story? Don't pick a fight with Jesus!

**II Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17** is part of a larger apocalyptic passage that dominates Paul's second letter to the Thessalonian church. Paul introduces his concern about how the Thessalonian Christians view the end time with the words, "As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here" (2:1-2). Apparently, many in the church in Thessalonica believed that "the Day of the Lord is already here". Holding to such a belief, Paul presents in this Epistle Lesson for today will radically skew their understanding of their mission and God's call to the world. Therefore, they need to hold to a right belief regarding the Day of the Lord.

What does Paul mean by "the Day of the Lord"? The Day of the Lord was the Old Testament expression used by the prophets to describe God's cataclysmic intervention into human history. The understanding of that intervention is interpreted in several different ways in the Hebrew Bible.

First, the term is used by both Jeremiah and Ezekiel to describe Jerusalem's siege and capture by the Babylonians in 587-6 BCE (e.g., Lam. 1:21; Ezek. 34:12). Of course, this siege and the resulting collapse and destruction of Israel were a most profound cataclysm to the Jews. As far as they knew at the time, this was the end of everything for them – as momentous as would be the destruction of the earth itself!

But the concept of the Day of the Lord is also used by Old Testament prophets to describe the defeat of Israel's future enemies (e.g., Isa. 13:6, 9, 13; Jer. 46:10; 47:4). In this scenario, the Day of the Lord is not cataclysmic for Israel, but is only so for those who oppose Israel. Thus, for the xenophobic in Israel, it is a time of rejoicing, for Israel is saved from the final judgment while the rest of the world goes to hell!

A third use of the concept of the Day of the Lord is less sanguine than the second, and closer to the first usage. It is that apocalyptic moment when Israel and Judah will be finally judged, condemned and punished by God (e.g., Joel 1:15; 2:1-2, 11; Zeph. 1:7-10, 14-15; 2:2-3; 3:8; Zech. 12-14). It is a day for Israel to dread, for it will represent the final destruction and judgment of the nation, far exceeding the judgment that came to them through their defeat by Babylonia.

The New Testament authors picked up on the Old Testament image of the Day of the Lord, nuancing it to fit their particular theology. These writers embrace the second and third interpretations of the Day of the Lord (that it is a day of destruction and judgment for both all the nations of the world and for Israel), but consistently connect that day to the second coming of Jesus the Christ (e.g., Luke 17:24; John 8:56; I Cor. 1:8; 5:5; II Cor. 1:14; Phil. 1:6, 10; 2:16; I Thess. 5:2; II Peter 3:10; Rev. 6:17; 16:14). Thus, the New Testament authors preserve the twin elements of the Old Testament theology of the Day of the Lord, so that God both “saves” and “judges” both all individuals and all the peoples (nations) of the world through Jesus. This is the belief that underlies Paul’s message about the last days to the Church in Thessalonica.

Paul’s concern about the Thessalonians is their belief that “the day of the Lord is already here”. They are declaring to each other that God’s final judgment has already happened and that the world is now living in the end-time. In other words, it can’t get any worse than it is right now!

This is a dangerous conclusion, because if the Thessalonian Christians really believe this, then God’s judgment has already come and it is fruitless for the church to be engaged in the task of working for the transformation of human society and the salvation of its people. Belief that they are living in the end time eliminates any sense of need or urgency in seeking the salvation or liberation of the world, and cuts short any sense of mission and purpose. Therefore, it is imperative for Paul to disabuse the Thessalonian church of this conviction as quickly as possible!

But where did they get the idea that it’s as bad as it is ever going to get? What caused them to conclude that the Day of the Lord had already occurred? Paul alludes to the possibility that they may have misinterpreted his writings or his talk (“by word or by letter, as though from us”), so he quickly makes clear that misunderstanding. But he then goes on to acknowledge that an event had occurred that was as horrible as anyone could imagine it could possibly be, and it seems likely that the church interpreted that event as the ultimate abomination that would immediately trigger the Day of the Lord. What was that event?

Paul wrote, “Let no one deceive you in any way; for the day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the Lawless One is revealed, the one destined for destruction. He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God” (vss. 4-5). To what is Paul referring?

In 40 CE, the Roman emperor Caligula ordered the Roman army to erect a statue of him in the Temple at Jerusalem, thus desecrating the Temple and making himself the “god” of the temple rather than Yahweh. It was prevented from happening simply because the Jews sacrificed themselves in large numbers to stop that desecration. This incident stunned not only the Jews around the world, but also many Gentiles and particularly Christian Gentiles. It stunned Christians, not only because of the obvious sacrilege, but because it was an act that made it abundantly clear that the Roman emperor was “declaring himself to be God” and thus making clear that loyalty and allegiance had to be given to him and not to Yahweh (Jews) or to Christ (Christians). “It can’t get any worse than this”, Christians said to each other, and thus they concluded that God’s judgment in the ensuing death of Caligula (the “day of the Lord”) had come upon the Roman Empire and upon the whole earth. This idea had now become so

pronounced that, by 51 CE, Paul had to write this letter to the Thessalonian church to disabuse them of this belief!

“It *can* get worse than this”, Paul in essence writes to the Thessalonians in verses 5-12. And it will get much worse than this. Rome is the epitome of dominating power, exercised through its Caesar (the political system), its military, its economics and even its religion (emperor worship). In a profound sense, Caesar is the anti-Christ (a term Paul doesn’t use), the antithesis of all that Jesus Christ is. He is the “Lawless One”, with his power and deceptive wonders being the work of Satan through him. He will bring unbelievable horror upon God’s people – both Jews and Christians. And the abomination at the Temple was only the first indication of how bad that persecution will become.

What Paul is writing to the Thessalonians is designed to help them to understand and grasp the extent and depth of evil in the world. Christians can be quite naïve about evil. But through his apocalyptic writing, Paul describes the depth of evil against which the church has been cast by God. That evil is not simply personal and individual, but is corporate, social and systemic. The entire system becomes evil, committed to creating and maintaining societies of domination, lust for power, greed and control. And that evil can even invade the church when its leaders succumb to the temptations of money, power or sex. It is crucial, if we are to effectively carry out the mission to which we have been called by God, that Christians have a soberly realistic and comprehensive understanding of evil.

What, then, are God’s people called to do in the light of such dreadful corporate, systemic and individual evil? Paul states in today’s Epistle Lesson, “But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter” (vss. 13-15).

We are all that we have! So be thankful for each other, and don’t take each other for granted! In this passage, Paul reminds the Thessalonian Christians that they are chosen by God “as the first fruits for salvation” and called by God as those “first fruits” to work for the transformation of the world around them to be more like the kingdom of God. As God through Christ has worked in each of them and in their corporate body to elect, call, provide faith, sanctify and glorify them, so they are to be at work in the world around them blessing that world with God’s work within them. They are to be “little Christ’s” to the world. And that can occur only by “holding to the traditions that you were taught by us”, and living out those traditions through their lives and involvement in the public life of the world.

Paul then concludes today’s lesson with a blessing for the Thessalonian church, now sent forth into mission. “Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope; comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word” (vss. 16-17). In other words, “keep on keeping on in carrying out God’s call to you in this world of sin, because God is giving you the grace and hope to carry out that mission. Keep those eyes on the prize”! Amen!

(Copyright © 2010 by Robert C. Linthicum )