

# *“Fake News and Real News”*

*Malachi 4:1-2a, II Thessalonians 3:6-13, Luke 21:5-19*

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From the Pulpit

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our salvation.*

*Amen.*

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**The “end of time” and our telling of it is real news.** In Luke’s Gospel today, Jesus tells the people who were adoring the Holy Temple of Jerusalem, and its noble stones and offerings, *“that the day will certainly come when there shall not be one stone upon another that will not be thrown down”* (Luke 21:5-6). Shaken by thoughts that their beautiful Temple will be destroyed, the people question Jesus as to when and how? Rather than answer directly, he says, *“Take heed that you are not led astray, for many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he,’ and ‘The time is at hand.’ Do not go after them. And when you hear of wars and rebellions, do not be terrified,*

*for this must first take place, but the end will not be at once” (Luke 21:8-9).*

**The end of time.** Biblically, we often think of the end of time as something coming - something wicked, something frightful – that destroys the whole earth. And it is. However, for the Jews of Jerusalem centered in their Temple worship, the end of time as they knew it came just 40 years after Jesus prophetic proclamation when Solomon’s Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. In the siege of Jerusalem, led by future Emperor Titus, it is recorded that 1.1 million people were slain – few were rebels, most were women and children. The population was so high because it was Passover and because people had fled the advancing army to seek refuge from the assault. But, the fortified city and everything on the Temple Mount was destroyed and burned to the ground. It is an event that is remembered to this day by Jews late in July called Tisha B’Av (or the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av) which recognizes the day on which both the first and second temple were destroyed.

As it did for the Jews in 70 AD, “the end of time” has come through the ages for races, tribes, ethnic groups, faith traditions, and species of creation through the utter assault and purposeful devastation wrought by those who seek to annihilate those they hate or want gone. The “end of time” has also come when humans seeking wealth and power have destroyed other humans and creatures out of a disturbing lack of concern for the life itself.

But, the end of time comes- more often than we notice or care to resist – for far too many far too often. For example, how many of us have noticed that 1/3 of the birds in North America, one billion birds, have died off in the past 40 years? Have you noticed that the classic V formations of Canada Geese are rare these days? What was once an Autumnal expectation of these beautiful birds flying south in formation, has become a rarity.

In the long history of the world that has followed Jesus's admonition, for all too many, the end of **their** time came with power and might destroying life and hope. In places hallowed by God and people, stones were pulled down stone by stone, walls destroyed, altars shattered and lives changed and crushed forever.

For Christians in Europe, it must have felt like the end of time when the walls of their ancient cathedrals were blown apart in aerial bombings by friends and foes in WWII. In generations since, African-American churches in the American south have been burned and bombed by racists. In Iraq, Syria and Palestine, sisters and brothers in Christ whose simple, often nonviolent faith has borne witness for thousands of years, have seen their houses of prayer razed and bulldozed to the ground. Not only churches lay in ruins. Temples, synagogues, mosques, Buddhist shrines and houses of prayer have been laid low by people across time in the name of God and in the name of evil powers which seek to control others.

**Through all “the ends of time,” Jesus’ words ring true.** In spite of nation rising against nation, kingdom against kingdom, earthquakes, famine, pestilence, terror, imprisonment, and great signs from heaven coming down to earth, **Jesus promises deliverance.** Through it all, he calls his followers to bear witness for God. These are not dusty words spoken to long gone listeners. Jesus is calling us to trust in our hearts that answers will come to us in the face of our worst nightmares.

This is his promise: *“By your endurance, you will gain your souls”* (Luke 21:19). He calls us to have enduring vision! In the face of days that seem like the end of time as we know it, you and I need to trust that God’s enduring vision given to us through Jesus and others who reflect his light, will gain our souls.

I know there are days when you look at the world in which we live, and your struggles in personal life, and wonder if this can be so. Even true saints struggle in the face of such hardship to find endurance. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, true saint of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, had such days. Near the end of her life, Mother Teresa was traveling with a novice and found herself stuck in an airport with no flight. She totally melted down. Yes, this saint of Christian faith had a meltdown in the airport waiting area. (You are in good company my friends!) She said, *“I am so tired of problems. I have given my life to the service of people and all I get in return are their problems and more difficulty. More challenges. More problems. I am sick and tired of problems!”*

The young novice turned to her mother superior and asked, *“Mother, would it help you if you were able to see each problem as a gift from God, some of these gifts are small, some are great?”* St. Teresa of Calcutta looked into the beautiful and earnest eyes of her young and inquiring novice and responded, *“Yes! I must see each problem as a gift from God. When the toilets are running over, it is a small gift from God to move water to our people in new ways. When bombs are dropping on innocent victims, God’s gives us a great gift to minister to the suffering in their hour of greatest need.”*

As Mother Teresa moved to the end of her time on earth, she made a decision to always perceive her problems as gifts from God, some small, some great. I like that. I challenge each of us to see the problems of our lives as gifts from God. If we do this, we too will end up responding with enduring vision which will gain our souls!

When you or a family member are suffering with a mental health condition or cancer, how is this a gift from God? When you or a loved one is faced with addiction, how this is a gift from God? When you see yourself and co-workers being mistreated by superiors, how is this a gift from God? When you don’t know where your next paycheck is coming from, how is this a gift from God? At the time, it may feel like the “end of time” for you, but how is it a gift from God?

Faced with persecution and peril 400 years before Christ, the prophet Malachi proclaimed to God’s people in the midst of evildoers acting against them that *“the sun of righteousness will rise*

*upon you with healing in its wings.*” In the eyes of God, God would create a new Jerusalem as a joy, its people as a delight. No longer would they be trapped by weeping and distress. God proclaimed through the prophet that a new day would come for a city cast in darkness. This new vision was one for a vital and renewed community of faith!

Remember Jesus’ words, ***“By your endurance, you will gain your soul”***? We need such a vital and enduring vision today. We need it in our individual lives, our congregational life, and our larger community reaching all the way to the chambers in the Statehouse and the US Capitol and the Oval Office in the White House!

In these times in which we are challenged daily to sort out “Fake news” and “Real news” by news sources which all claim to be real (but all aren’t real news sources as we know), we have to figure out what is true and what is not. The challenge is to be non-anxious in anxiety producing times.

We can start right here - with ourselves. As a faith community, we can make a choice to be a “church in ruins” or a “church with enduring vision.” I have witnessed both churches firsthand. I have seen churches in spiritual ruin, in which buildings are still standing, but people have become anxious and lack trust in God. Such churches have, in the words of Anthony B. Robinson, become vulnerable to the anxiety that set them in a downward cycle and creates more fatigue and anxiety. In such a vicious

cycle, congregations feel like they are getting nowhere and the frustration of this leads to depression in the body of Christ.

**I have also seen churches with enduring vision – churches with virtuous cycles.** By the grace of God, they find a way to enter “to worship and depart to serve” God with holy boldness. As in the letter to the Hebrews, they proclaim, *“Let us come near to God with a sincere heart and a sure faith, with hearts that have been purified from a guilty conscience and with bodies washed with clean water.”* You see the difference? A virtuous cycle begins with a sense of confidence and hope in what God has done and is doing, as opposed to the vicious cycle of anxiety in which folks worry about what we must do.

The Letter to the Hebrews repeatedly juxtaposes the priests of the old rite with the priests of the new rite. The old priesthood is characterized by relentless, repetitive and often ineffective activity. Like rats on a wheel, the old order works itself to death. However, Christ has a different way. He offers for all time a single sacrifice for sins, and then sits down at the right hand of God.

In the vicious cycle, the saying goes, “it is all up to us.” In the virtuous cycle, the saying goes, “it is all up to God.” So, what will help us live in vital cycles and relinquish the vicious cycles? In the words of Stephen Covey in Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, *“the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.”* In other words, when we trust in God to give us the gift of vitality, all things will work together for good.

**Now, some of us are control addicts.** We have to manage everything in our lives, in the church, all the time and we have to do it OUR WAY. This means, if it doesn't work out my way, then the other person must take to the highway. This attitude shows little to no trust in God or fellow Christians. A vital congregation (and person!) lives by another set of rules. The rules for the road of vital congregations is not control but Confidence in God's grace and love.

Anthony Robinson offers this story of a church with enduring vision. This church decided to focus on, what Robinson calls, "the vital few." They found the vital few things that they did faithfully and effectively. They identified Sunday morning at Second Church as "the vital few." They believed that Second Church did Sunday morning really well. They had two services of worship. They had a strong teaching ministry for adults and children, and they focused on hospitality and fellowship during that morning time each week. Their pastor said of them, "we discovered that if we get Sunday morning right, everything else seems to take care of itself. Or at least flow from that." She added, "I love Sunday mornings at Second! There is so much joy!" The pastor reports that the boards, committees, and council of the church are going well because of the infectious enthusiasm of Sundays at Second Church. (Anthony B. Robinson, *The Christian Century*, November 2, 2004, "Vicious Cycles," pp. 8-9).

Robinson concludes, *"This vicious-and-virtuous-cycle phenomenon rings true for our personal lives as well. When high anxiety hovers around me like*

*a toxic cloud, I am no longer creative or productive. I work faster and harder, but often the only thing I have to show for it is a case of simmering resentment” (Ibid).*

How true! How many of you find yourselves resentful - here at church, in your workplace or home? Do you hear yourself saying, “*A few of us do all the work!*” “*So many people around here never do anything!*” This is an early warning sign for a church and a people on the edge of ruin - spiritually, and perhaps physically.

**Here today, take away some real (GOOD) news.** Let’s be virtuous (not vicious) as a church and as individuals. Let’s choose to endure, to face whatever challenge is before us and see it as a gift from God. Let’s do this together. Let’s stick together when things fall apart. There is nothing fake about this. Rather, there is everything faithful about this. So, let’s be faithful as Christ would have us be – and through it all, in the words of Jesus, “**by our endurance, we will gain our souls.**” Amen.

