

*In the Mean Time**

Isaiah 65:17-25; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

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If that was more scripture than you are accustomed to hearing on Sunday morning, you have to remember that I'm from the South, where more people read the Bible than the newspaper. Even those who read both sometimes put more faith in the Bible than the news. They read the headlines for signs of the times. They want to be ready when the last day comes.

So I asked for the full dose today — Isaiah's vision of the new creation, where "the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox," and Luke's vision of the end times, when "nation will rise against nation" in the midst of great earthquakes, famines and plagues.

With visions like those kept alive by a holy book, you can't really blame the biblically literate for wondering if the end time has begun. Whatever was going on in Isaiah's day, his promises still sound so promising that he could be saying them almost anywhere in the world today. He could be walking through a hospital in Nairobi. ("No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime.") He could be standing in a refugee camp in Gaza. ("They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.")

Luke could be picking up shrapnel still hot from the latest roadside bomb in Iraq ("Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.") He could be standing in the smoke of the west coast fires, watching the hills burn though the night like a field of fallen stars. ("There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.")

Of course people have believed they were living in the end times for thousands of years now — when Vesuvius blew, when Rome fell, when the Great War began, then the next one, when the Twin Towers crumpled, when the tsunami struck, when Katrina hit, when the drought came. Some have even tried to hasten the end by various means, including the drinking of poison, the arming of militias, and the funding of religious groups committed to forcing the apocalyptic timetable they read in scripture. Even if those things are as foreign to you as a tent revival, you still have to decide how to live in a world where frightening things happen as regularly as your heart beats. Oil hits \$100 a barrel. The government of Pakistan fails. The makings of a dirty bomb are found in an apartment in Brooklyn. Like most of you, I am pretty well insulated from the more ordinary catastrophes of human life on earth. Kids don't shoot each other with illegal handguns where I live. If I need an operation, my insurance will cover most of it. When I run out of food, I go buy some more.

I do not take any of these privileges for granted, but I know there are things they cannot shield me from. How do you drink your second cup of coffee while scientists log record-breaking heat waves? How do you get in your twenty minutes on the tread-

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mill while the US and Russia line up on Iran? Especially if you are a person of faith—how do you live between the visions of Luke and Isaiah without turning away from a world that seems bent on its own destruction? How do you live in the mean time without losing heart?

As urgent as these questions are, there is nothing new about them. Christians have been asking them for as long as they have expected Jesus to return, which they started doing even before he had died. When nation rose against nation, he told them they should not be afraid. When they received word of natural disaster, of food shortage, and galloping sickness unto death, they should raise their heads so they did not miss “the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory” (Luke 21.27). When they saw these things taking place, he told them they would know their redemption was drawing near. “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Luke 21:32-33).

That was comforting, for a while. But by the time Paul started writing letters to the earliest churches some twenty years later, people wanted to know what had happened to Jesus. The terrible stuff was right on schedule. Pilate had been relieved of duty for killing too many people. The emperor Claudius had expelled all Jews from Rome. The hostile divorce between church and synagogue was well underway, along with a Jewish revolt against Rome that would fail spectacularly. And yet as hard as the faithful searched the clouds, the sky stayed empty for them. They were dying for some sign of a savior. They were dying with no sign of a savior, and they were losing heart. Paul had a lot to say to them, but almost none of it was as strange as what he wrote to the Thessalonians (in a passage I might never have found if it had not been paired with the other two for this Sunday). “Keep away from believers who are living in idleness,” he wrote them. “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.”

Now that is truly odd. The world is falling apart, Jesus is AWOL, the Thessalonians are losing heart, and Paul responds by commanding them to get out and earn a living. No more idle lunches at the soup kitchen. No more sitting around each other’s kitchen tables reading the Bible and getting into everyone else’s business. If you don’t work, you don’t eat! Paul doesn’t eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, he says, and neither should you. So wherever you are going for Thanksgiving dinner, be sure to take your checkbooks. The suggested donation for Christians is \$35 per person.

What can this possibly mean? Was Martha right after all, breaking a sweat in the kitchen while her sister Mary sat idly at Jesus’ feet? Were the disciples wrong to leave their fishing nets in order to follow an unemployed carpenter’s son from Galilee? Should everyone at the feeding of the five thousand have put money in the breadbaskets before they took anything out?

I don’t think Paul was thinking about any of that. I think he was thinking about the church in Thessalonica, where some people were giving up on the world. Their faithful expectations had come to nothing. They had been watching the clouds so long that their necks hurt. They were so convinced of the futility of their actions, so alienated from their government, so at odds with their pagan neighbors, so *disap-*

pointed in God that the most faithful thing many of them could think of to do was to resign from life and focus their attention on the end.

So what if the cupboard goes bare? There is usually a neighbor willing to send a plate of leftovers. So what if drought makes drinking water cost as much as gas? There is nothing to be done. So what if the local economy fails, the schools can't afford books, the banks take back people's houses, and all the doctors move away? This is the way of the world, and the world is doomed.

If Paul got exercised about attitudes like these, it was because he knew what idleness can do to a human soul, not to mention a whole church. It isn't just a matter of lying around on the couch watching reruns of *Grey's Anatomy* while moss grows in the toilet bowl or staying home on election day because nothing's going to change anyway. Idleness is a matter of surrendering interest in this world. It is a matter of divesting from the things that make this world go—business, government, neighborhoods, schools—and counting on God or other people to pick up the slack. Idleness is a failure of purpose, a failure of nerve. It is a grave misunderstanding of the God who means to redeem this world, not abandon it.

When Paul saw it going on in Thessalonica, he kicked a word I cannot say in church. He told people to get up off their *bleeps* and get back to work. He pointed to his own hard work as an example to be imitated. He commanded them "in the Lord Jesus Christ" to do their work quietly and earn their own livings. He told them not to be weary in doing what is right.

These verses have been put to wretched use by those opposed to social welfare, just as other verses from Paul have been used to oppose emancipation for slaves and women and to keep gay and lesbian people in the balcony at church. Paul comes in so handy on issues like these that plenty of people have written him off as an outdated apostle, too bound to his own time to help us much in ours. Does anyone here, for instance, really have a serious problem with idleness?

I doubt it. This church includes some of the busiest, most involved people I know—which means that at least some of you have come to the wisdom that busyness is as soul-deadening as idleness. Done hard enough, busyness can be just another way of dealing with despair. When God doesn't come, work harder. When the world wobbles on its axis, clean all your closets right down to the baseboards. When you are convinced there is nothing you can do to change the weather, the White House, or the war, go shopping. Create another you on Secondlife.com/. Shrink the circle of your concern to your own welfare. There are all kinds of ways to divest from the world.

I don't know what Paul might say in his first letter to the Cambridgians. He might have to live here a little while or at least hear some reports from Timothy or Silas before he decided what we needed to hear before we could really hear the gospel, but I do not think that our spiritual condition would be unknown to him. He too lived in the mean time. He lived with high expectations of God, of himself, and of the world that crashed on a regular basis. He was under no illusion that he had control over anything. Neither idle nor busy-busy-busy, he chose something more like *engagement*—walking 10,000 miles during the last decade of his life—all the while believing that the Christ would return any second. Paul was no stranger to despair; yet he never checked out.

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Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.”

It is a very odd Christian teaching, but there it is. Paul was apparently convinced that God meant to redeem this world, not to abandon it, and that the best way for God’s people to remember that was to stay invested in the messy, unspiritual, and often futile activities of ordinary human life on earth, such as earning a living, dealing with less than perfect jobs, managing money, and making out grocery lists.

Investment in the world is not optional. When the Christ finally appears in the clouds, better he should catch us vacuuming up the cat hair or rubbing our eyes at the computer than lying in unmade beds reading books on spirituality while the bills go unpaid and the weeds take over the yard—or (Paul might have added if he had spent some time with us) being mere busy bodies, multi-tasking our ways into oblivion while this world God so loves suffers the consequences of our self-absorption.

“Do not be weary in doing what is right,” he says, without telling us what *right* is. I guess he trusts we can figure that out, at least if we stay engaged with the world and each other. For thousands of years now, that is how God’s people have survived the mean time without losing heart. And lo! Here we still are, with today’s fresh chance to do what is right.