

November 17, 2024  
Twenty-Six Sunday after Pentecost

Let us pray: *Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, you are our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.*

I'd like to begin today's sermon with a poem by T.S. Eliot called Gerontion:

*“Think now*

*History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors*

*And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,*

*Guides us by vanities.*

*Think now*

*She gives when our attention is distracted*

*And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions”*

The title of this poem Gerontion, is Greek for "little old man." This was written through the eyes of an elderly man who describes Europe after World War One.

A strand that affects us in our modern life today interconnects this poem and all of our lectionary passages. And that is the understanding of our relationship with time.

In the Book of Daniel, that we just read, the Lord spoke to Daniel in a vision regarding a future that will be full of anguish. Nations will rise against nations, but

the people who are written in the book of life will be delivered. It says, “The wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky and those who lead the righteous, like the stars forever.”

In today’s passage in Psalm 16, we join David in a prayer for God’s hope and protection for those who take refuge in God and his counsel. We find that God gives us a spirit that rejoices because God will never abandon us, He shows us the path of life and in him is the fullness of joy.

The future depicted in our Epistle comes from a place of hope as well, because Jesus is our one and only necessary high priest. Because of a single offering Jesus has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. Paul says in this passage, “Since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.”

Then, the Gospel for today meets us where we are now. Jesus predicts to his disciples what will happen in the future. Jesus says, see all this? The land and the buildings will all be destroyed. Remember that Jesus is heading to Jerusalem where he will be ultimately nailed on the cross. Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all

these things are about to be accomplished?”

Understanding that we are a part of history and time is important. A few weeks ago, we remembered all the saints who have lived before us at All Saints Sunday, and today, we contemplate about the future—we don't know what will happen a year from now, let alone a minute from now. We are part of history. As God says to Daniel, “There shall be a time...”

We are part of time, which involves changes. We need to process the times in our lives that involve change. As followers of Jesus, we have hope that God will take care of us. God is in history. God is part of all the cultures of the world. God is in the sustaining essence of the universe and of nature. And God promises never to leave us alone.

Many of us have experienced trauma caused by changes and disappointments. This might include death, divorce, loss of a job, or an illness, or a broken relationship. These traumas and disappointments may make us scared and hurting. Now, more than ever we need God and each other for support. We need to minister as a body of Christ to face what is ahead, and the church has a big job ahead to spread the message of truth and love to all.

The Reverend Gavin Ortlund wrote a piece entitled *Every hair on your head is numbered*. He wrote about God's providential rule over all things. In the Bible, the doctrine of divine providence is not only a matter for our minds, but also a matter of our hearts and lives. We recall the comfort David finds in Psalm 139, when he says to God, "O Lord, you have searched me and known me, you know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar." Or when Jesus says in the Gospel of Luke, "Fear not" for I know you and love you so much, even, "the hairs of your head are all numbered."

How might the doctrine of providence encourage those of us struggling in our everyday lives today, such as joblessness, physical ailments or enemies? First, if we can understand that we are not our own, but we belong to God, both body, soul and in death. Christ has paid fully for all our sins and has set us free from Satan's powers. God is always watching over us, every inch of us, in fact that all things must work together for our salvation. And because we believe in him, the Holy Spirit assures us of eternal life and makes us wholeheartedly ready and able from now on to live for him.

We can take great comfort when we are going through difficult times that no matter what happens to us, nothing happens outside of our heavenly Fathers loving plan for our ultimate salvation.

No doubt about it, as T.S Eliot's poem says, "History is full of cunning passages,

and contrived corridors. So we need each other's love, empathy and forgiveness, and that's why we gather together every Sunday. We are here to be together, to reaffirm our faith in times of joy and struggles. Jesus knows our future, and he is present in our lives, especially in our worship and when we celebrate Holy Communion. Our presence here every Sunday prepares us for what lies ahead each week.

There is a useful model developed by Elizabeth Kubler Ross that is used by many people in the corporate and medical fields to help us understand the stress of any major life change we are experiencing. Learning to understand change is also appropriate for us in the church. Obviously, this model will differ for each person and their situations.

To begin, when a trauma or unexpected deep change happens, whatever it may be right now in your life, there is first a *shock, or surprise*. Generally we react next with possibly a sense of *denial and disbelief*; we look for evidence that it may not be true. This emotion tends to spiral us downward towards a feeling of *frustration*, recognition that things are now different; sometimes we become emotional and angry. For some, we spiral down to *depression*, and we may be physically affected by a lack of good health or energy. Next, we slowly rebound by *experimenting*, engaging with our new situations. Afterwards, we make *decisions*, learning how to work in the new situation and feeling more positive. Then ultimately, *integration*

begins to happen with change now as part of our lives.

As I said, this is a general process, but helpful to know as we navigate what stage we are in. Throughout this process, we must remember to be easy on ourselves and forgive ourselves, and seek support and advice from safe and loving people. This is also where our church community must extend our embrace without judgment but with kindness.

As believers in Christ are called to love, forgive and defend what is just and honorable to all people. It is at this time that we need to remember that not all people have the choices we have or the power and privileges we have. We are to be advocates for the poor, the immigrant, the unhoused, the aged, the vulnerable, and all who are prejudiced against. When we can, we are to not be complacent with our situation or values.

A life in Christ is always about outward giving. Christ never sat back when there was injustice happening, but defended people. We too need to be people of action. As the analogy goes, “don’t hide our light under a bushel.” Jesus says in Matthew, “Let your light so shine before people, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

The Dalai Lama teaches an outward expression of faith as well, in what he refers to as “wise-selfishness.” He believes there is a time for wise-selfishness and teaches

that compassion can be taught because, “Destruction of neighbor is destruction of yourself because everything is interdependent.”

So, if you are anxious about the future and about changes ahead, recognize and work through the complexity of your feelings, but don't wallow in disappointments because it can quickly turn into depression, chronic stress, and anxiety disorders — all can be emotional triggers for physical disease. Next, try to get support and engage in some helpful practices. Volunteer at church, service to others will take the focus off of yourself. Go for a walk, bake, and watch happy shows, cuddle with your pet, or call a friend. Then get on with your life, hopefully with a bit more resilience and wisdom.

Remember, we are a part of history, and Jesus has been with us in the past and promises to be with us now and in the future. God said to Daniel, although there will be a time of anguish, there will also be a time of deliverance, and that indeed is hopeful news.

Jesus reassures us in today's Gospel that he is with us even when life's unexpected changes happen. When life doesn't look like it once was, Jesus is still there to carry us all the way through and if we can, let's get up and keep working for God's heavenly kingdom. Amen.