

A Sermon for the 23rd Sunday after Trinity, November 19, 2006

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“We...eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself” (From the epistle, Philippians 3:17-21).

The epistle summarizes the Christian hope. We are waiting for Jesus Christ to come. As we say in the creed, “He shall come again, with glory.” When it comes, he will change our current bodies that decay so that they will be like his glorious and immortal resurrection body. He is able to do this because, as Lord of all creation, he has the power to make all things new.

To envision this, we must expand our imagination beyond the limitations of space and time as we know it. The appearance of Jesus will reveal new dimensions of reality. It will mark the end of this age and the beginning of the new age in which the prayer, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done” will be answered fully and finally.

Now, this is an astounding hope, beyond the pale of ordinary expectation. Consequently, many people mock the Christian hope as “pie in the sky.” Many modern Christians, listening to the voices of doubt, take their eyes off of this hope and put their faith in lesser things. Faith becomes a political or social program or a mere source of personal comfort.

The root issue here is whether we really believe in the power and promises of God. Do we really believe that God created the world out of nothing? Do we believe that he created man in his image? Do we believe that he led Israel out of Egypt and into the Promised Land? Do we believe that the Son of God became man, died for our sins and rose from the dead—that *his* dead body was transformed?

If we really believe that God is Almighty, then the idea that he can bring this world and our lives to a glorious conclusion, beyond our wildest dreams, is not really incredible. In fact, if we believe that God is Almighty, we should expect him to write a fantastic ending to the story.

The change the epistle speaks of has already begun in us. God changes people right now. God takes fallen, sinful people and changes them into children of God, heirs of the kingdom, saints. God changed Saul of Tarsus into St. Paul and Matthew, the publican, into St. Matthew, apostle and evangelist. God is changing us from what we are into what he wants us to be.

God changes things through his Holy Spirit. In the beginning, God brought order out of chaos as the Spirit of God moved over the face of the waters. God created man when he breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. The outward sign of water in baptism brings into our lives the regenerating gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit changes us. He makes us uncomfortable with the old patterns. He leads us to confession. He cleanses us from sin and teaches us to live in a new way with a new hope.

This ongoing change is the focus of the liturgy. The Eucharist is a transforming encounter with Jesus Christ that looks forward to that final transforming encounter of which the epistle speaks. We pray that our sinful bodies will be made clean and our souls washed. We mean two things. First, we want

to move forward in Christ-likeness from week to week, month to month, year to year. Second, we long for the change to be finished. We long, once and for ever, to be what God intends us to be.

We say in the liturgy that Jesus instituted the Eucharist “until his coming again.” We do not believe in a never ending cycle or circle of life. We believe we are heading to a climax, an end. The life of prayer is a pattern of dying and rising that looks forward to a final death and a final resurrection. We eagerly wait for the Lord Jesus to come in person and finish the work that is now in process.

We live in a challenging time. We face the specter of a dangerous world in which every two-bit tyrant can have a nuclear bomb, in which the enemies of true faith seem to be growing stronger, in which the one certainty about the future is that we don’t know what will happen. And our bodily ailments and the tragedies that we see and suffer remind us, constantly, that this life ends in death.

In the face of these things, we must keep the fullness of the Christian hope in the forefront of our hearts and minds. God has not given up his authority over the world, We must constantly remember that God is Almighty and that Jesus is Lord.

God’s plan for us is not merely that we might hang on and have some religious comfort in the midst of our woe. God’s plan is to send his Son to judge the world, raise us from the dead and give us a place in his eternal kingdom. We are called to live confidently in the light of this hope. As Romans says, “Neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities nor powers nor things present nor things to come...nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:38).

The conclusion of this world will not be determined either by random forces of nature or by the forces of evil that Christ has already defeated. God has written his ending. Come what may, our hope is constant: “We...eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.”