

Thirty third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Before and After

Pastor Samuel B. Adams

November 17, 2013

Isaiah 65:17-25, Luke 21:5-19

I used to enjoy watching the game show, *Wheel of Fortune*. I always tried to beat the “on screen” contestant to the correct answer. Sometimes I actually won! Of course that game show’s hosts never witnessed my brilliance, and I never got any of that prize money! Some of my favorites were called **Before and After**. There was a root in the middle that formed one idea by adding letters at the beginning, and another by adding letters at the end.

In a way, *Before and After* is a useful metaphor for life as we live it. Remember that old saying, “Today is the tomorrow we worried about yesterday”? For this congregation, today is just exactly that! We have all been waiting anxiously for months for the Pastor Nominating Committee to finish their work. Today their Chair, Peter Dancy, has told you about the one they have selected – out of 300 applicants – as their candidate to be your next installed pastor. Dr. David Noble.

Today also brings another *Before and After* moment. We spent half a day yesterday with six people you elected as ruling elders and deacons. Our mission was to train and orient them to the tasks they have been called to assume. Some are seasoned, long term members and leaders. Others are brand new members who have recently joined Central on your journey of faith. After several hours together they were examined by the present session as the *Book of Order* mandates. Their exam was sustained, so today we will ordain and install them. They join other ruling elders and deacons continuing their service, leading you forward into God’s future for you, and with you.

Today’s lessons highlight the *Before and After* God. Both readings pivot around predictions about what was just ahead for God’s beloved, chosen people. One is inspiring. The other is terrifying. Both faithfully predict realities that can face God’s people in every time and place. The lesson from Luke points ahead toward a dreadful time. According to some biblical scholars, the predicted trouble had already come. They suggest that Luke was writing near the time when Rome destroyed Jerusalem.

The temple, long the center of their religious life, was reduced to ruins. Again. As it had been when the Babylonians conquered Judah. Trying to survive this new crisis, the Pharisees were seeking to purify their faith community by driving out Jewish believers who had become followers of Jesus. Christians were leaving Jerusalem to escape the trouble. Gentile Christian converts in Rome were being blamed for that great city's troubles. Some were being ripped to shreds by hungry lions, Others were burned at the stake. Ethnic cleansing is not a twentieth/twenty-first century phenomenon.

If these scholars are right, Luke's audience was eager to hear what Jesus had said about the end times. They had good reason to wonder if they were already in the middle of them! Clearly something was ending, taking many of them along with it!

In chapter 21 Luke writes that Jesus was walking with a group of disciples, admiring Herod's temple with all its marble and gold. And Jesus told them,

“as for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

Reading Luke's text as if Jesus' words had come to pass, the temple was already in ruins. The Jewish world that centered its cultic life in the temple had ended. A new Jewish world centered around the Torah was taking shape. A new Christian world formed around the writings of early followers of Jesus was in its infancy.

The recorded words of Jesus in this and similar passages have led to centuries of speculation about the ending days of this world as we know it. Since the first Christian century, pious followers of Christ have watched and waited for God's final action which would complete this creation and commence God's new heaven and new earth. They saw wars, earthquakes, and destruction in their own time. And they saw the faithlessness of their fellow inhabitants of planet earth. Their own troubled time might just be the one foretold. But so far, they have all turned out to be the prelude to new times.

Our time is no different. In my lifetime we have lived through Normandy and Hiroshima, through the Korean partition, and watched our nation nearly torn apart over Viet Nam. Our human fascination with predicting the future has not quit. Many speculated that Y2K would be the final moment of history. It wasn't. Then came the next frantic moment, the widely heralded end of the Mayan calendar. It wasn't the end, either. In the aftermath, we find passages like this one obscure and hard to read, almost hopelessly murky.

In the terrifying and chaotic events of the first century, people of faith remembered Jesus' promise as recorded by Luke.

“I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

Jesus' teaching was rooted in the rich soil of the Judaic story of Yahweh, a God who remains faithful – through an endless succession of endings and beginnings, *befores and afters* – always moving toward the unfolding purpose of Yahweh's creation. Jesus grew up hearing the words of the writer whom scholars call third Isaiah. He wrote when his people were returning to the devastation that was Jerusalem after Babylon. The city's walls were piles of broken stone. Solomon's magnificent temple was in ruins. To a beleaguered and beaten down people this prophecy gave a vision from Yahweh for a glorious new time beyond the troubled present:

“For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.”

This same vision is reflected in the creation narratives in Genesis. The first tells us that God created the heavens and the earth in six days, and on the seventh day God rested. Third Isaiah tells us that God's work was not done. God may have rested. But God had not *finally* completed creation. God is still at work behind and beyond our awareness, still shaping this world for God's own purposes.

The Creator. Who was not buried in the rubble of Jerusalem like the clay gods fashioned by those who needed a god they could see and touch. God who was not stopped by death on a cross. God who was not obliterated when Rome burned. God who has always been faithfully recreating the world according to God's purposes. God who was not stopped by a 20th century philosophy called communism, which tried to eradicate belief. God who will not be stopped by urban drug dealers, or by warring Syrians. God who will not be stopped by American consumerism, which tells us we are in charge of life; that we can buy whatever we need, leaving us to wonder who needs God, anyway?

Yesterday, in our training, we looked together at portions of our *Book of*

Order, part of the constitution of the Presbyterian Church, USA. The first section of that document is called the **Foundations of Presbyterian Polity**. It gives voice to the theological underpinnings of our life and work together as a congregation, and as a family of congregations. We found these words, which set out a theme that echoed through these foundational writings.

“The Church is to be a community of hope, rejoicing in the sure and certain knowledge that, in Christ, God is making a new creation. This new creation is a new beginning for human life and for all things. The Church lives in the present on the strength of that promised new creation.”

So, here we are, joyfully navigating Central’s hopeful new moment. Yes, there were moments not so long ago when it felt like the very foundations of this congregation were failing. There were moments of fear when some wondered whether Central had a future. And through it all God has been faithful. Your buildings still stand, and are in better condition than they been for some years. New leaders have emerged, sharing their energy and hope. You will soon install a pastor to walk forward alongside you.

The promise of Isaiah has been kept. God has been faithful. Once again we have seen how treasured words of scripture carry the power both to name and to shape the next chapters of Central’s history. Relying on God’s Spirit you will be part of God’s new creation. The past is finished and gone. The promise of God’s new creation is before you. Get ready for it! Thanks be to God! Amen.