

Isaiah 65:17-25

Canticle 9

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19

Last week at the service last week, Sunday 10:00 AM service, Father Chris revealed from the pulpit that I think he's a smart Alec. I don't think "Alec" was the term that he used, began with an A, had two S's and nothing else in between. But the fun was not over for me because at the announcements, Father Bill revealed that I actually was a smart Alec to which the whole congregation gasped in shock, which was quite edifying. And then of course, declared himself to be one as well. Well, both of them must have forgotten that it was my turn to get up in the pulpit this week. Welcome to my revenge.

So I'm going to talk about the last two sermons we heard. One from Father Bill on All Saints' Sunday, two weeks ago, and the second by Chris last week. Because I think these past two sermons signify how I really feel about my brothers. Not only are both of them smart Alecs, both of them are just plain smart.

And I was grateful for the good news, both of them offered because today's Gospel contains some of the most difficult words Jesus says to us. It's a prediction, a prophecy, a warning of calamity to come. It's a caution. Everything that you feel is stable today will be upturned tomorrow. Any kind of security that you may have in your house of worship, in your community, in your country, even in your own household, all of that will be violently upended. Everything will not last.

It's an unsettling account that we hear from Jesus. One that could lead us to a couple of different responses. The first is to take Jesus at His word and to understand that this is a prophecy and to be naturally terrified of what may happen to us.

I remember the first time that I heard this gospel text. It was in the midst of a church service, sitting in a Pew just like you. I was an adult when I was baptized, and so I was actually learning the faith as I went on. And so, the first time I heard it was in the midst of a worship service, and the preacher got up, proclaimed the gospel and sat down. I looked around at everyone who was sitting there and they were all just kind of smiling as if nothing had happened. As if we had just read a story from a children's book.

And I leaned over to Troy and I punched him in the gut and I said, "We need to talk." And after church, I went on for about 20 minutes and I said, "You know, I get it. I, myself had a division of my own household because when I converted, my parents weren't pleased at all and they were kind of upset, but I did not sign up to die." And Troy, in his usual forthright response said, "You're a follower of Jesus who was crucified. What made you think you are more special than He?"

It's slightly frightening to think that being Christian means that we're targets for persecution and malevolence. I think of what it must have been like if you are Jew in Germany during the Holocaust, or you're a Muslim after September 11th. All of a sudden you're targeted

and considered by some as an enemy of the state because of your faith. You could be taunted, you could be killed. It would absolutely be surreal for any of us to go through that experience. It would be a nightmare. Annie Dillard famously said that we should all wear crash helmets when we come into this place. Well, maybe she should have told us to all buy life insurance policies after we got baptized.

Now, if you don't want to be terrified by this text, you could simply put your fingers in your ears and say, "Jesus, I'm not listening." Because, I mean, if this were really true, would we all come to church regularly, let alone bring children and put them into harm's way? So maybe we could agree with some commentators who said that Jesus's words were directed towards the disciples of the day, right? So these are the ones who would later witness the destruction of the temple in 70 AD and then be persecuted because of their faith.

So when Jesus said they will arrest you. And persecute you, and you will be betrayed. And some of you will be put to death and you will be hated by all because of My name. The "you" were our spiritual ancestors, who lived during the awful times when Christians were considered enemies of the state and were persecuted and murdered because they aligned with Christ.

And what a relief if that's the case, then we don't have to worry about what Jesus said today. And that was meant for a time gone by. But hoping and wanting only status quo so our lives will be easy, is not exactly a faithful stance.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously called this "cheap grace." Grace without discipleship, without the cross, without forgiveness. It's also grace that has no gravity. Grace that has no purpose. Since we all think we're going to be fine and our lives really don't require much, as long as we keep our heads down and stay in our lanes, that's not grace, that's getting by. Is that why God gave you and me life and faith in Jesus Christ, or are we expected to be so much more than that?

A third option may be helpful to see Jesus's words as part of the apocalyptic tradition. These are words that aren't meant to be taken literally, but they're not meant to be ignored either. They are meant to unsettle us and wake us up to what we can be in all circumstances, no matter what we experience.

Apocalyptic imagery is filled with strange and frightening scenes, and in this case, they're wars, famines, plagues, earthquakes, families being ripped apart, innocent people being killed. All of it is meant to ask you and me in the extreme of circumstances, how should we be? When we're facing our own trials and tribulations, what should we do?

I sometimes get depressed when I think of how everything I see will pass away. I get overwhelmed when I think of the mess that the world is in. I'm afraid when I consider the possibilities of nations rising against nations and the United States becoming a fallen kingdom and our church not continuing as we know it, which is why I was so grateful for Chris's and Bill's sermons.

Last week, Chris told us that even when we don't know why things are happening, especially when things are not going well, we can let go of having our only response to trauma and tragedy to be to ask why and instead embrace a life of faith. Chris said, "I've come to a place where my faith is far less about understanding God and much more about following Jesus. It isn't about my need to know why things happen, but how I might respond when they do. I'm less interested in why and much more interested in asking God how, how might I love you as you love us? How might I give as you gave yourself for us all. No longer do I need to have all the answers, no longer do I need to have it all sorted out. I am increasingly comfortable with ambiguity and mystery."

What an enormously powerful way to approach a life that's filled with twists and turns that may render you in a place where you are stripped of everything you have. Perhaps you've come to the point in your life where you realize you have control over less and less. When you find yourself in a tough spot, when you have no leg to stand on and things are not going well and they're getting worse, you lean into trusting that God will give you what you need even, and especially, at that moment when you have nothing of your own to offer.

So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance, Jesus says, for, I will give you what you need. But then Jesus goes on, you will be betrayed and they're going to put you to death. But not a hair of your head will perish. Not a hair of your head will perish, but they're going to put you to death. Now, I love apocalyptic imagery, but that doesn't make much sense to me at all. And I would have remained terrified like I was the first time I heard this text had it not been for the brilliant sermon that Bill gave on All Saints' Sunday, and I commend it to you because on All Saints' Sunday, he remembered those who have kept the faith and died.

As more and more people I know die, All Saints' and All Souls' has become even more meaningful to me. The death of a human being is traumatizing no matter what causes it. Old age, illness, house fire, a school shooting, war, martyrdom. The finitude of death is astonishing. In *Understanding Your Grief*, a group that we have right now, Hunter Torres described it as if someone took a knife and sliced her down the middle.

Thanks be to God though that grieving the dead is not our final response to death. We do not give terror, trauma, or tragedy, the right to determine when the game is over. As Bill masterfully described the lives of the saints, he offered to us that the saints don't play finite games where there's winners and there's losers, but they play infinite games where there is no ending and the game keeps going, but in different ways.

Bill said the resurrection is the start of something we cannot finish. Death finishes us all. But thanks be to God and Jesus Christ, all who believe in Him live, and that is an infinite game. And saints play an infinite game. The infinite game of resurrection. It's the reason, saints, that you and I can manage whatever is thrown our way, because anything that happens to us has to be read in a context of a life, of a plan, of a play that goes far beyond even our own death. Death is not the end game. All of those injustices and agonies that we face do not have the final say. We are in the infinite game of life.

I remember once in Bible study we were talking about the tragedy of Noah and the flood. And it was just quite alarming to think that God could get so enraged with us as to flood the whole entire world. And I read out loud for the sake of sort of putting some flesh on this, a disturbing rendition that was from Karl Knausgård's book, *A Time for Everything*, where he imagined what it might've been like for a mother and her infant drowning as the waters rose. And we were asking all kinds of why questions. Why would God be okay with destroying so much? Why do the innocents have to suffer? Why trust this God?

After the Bible study who one of our own faithful, John Marsh, came up to me and he said, you know, Manisha, I think we're making an assumption that there's nothing better than this earth. Perhaps what we receive after death is even more magnificent than what we can see.

That's the infinite game. That is trusting God even though you do not understand it and so asking questions of how to be rather than why. And as Christians, this is how we witness to the promise of God through Christ. We do not remain frightened of what is to come. We don't hunker down and pretend to ignore the signs and importance of doom and destruction that show up. We play the long game and we wade right in no matter the outcome, trusting that God and Christ will provide for us. Let it be so. Amen.

[End of Recording]