

Saint Matthew's/San Mateo Episcopal Church

Pentecost 25, Proper 28, November 14, 2021

READINGS:

Daniel 12:1-3

Psalm 16

Hebrews 10:11-14, (15-18), 19-25

Mark 13:1-8

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our collect for today reminds us that ALL of holy Scripture has been written for our learning. All - not just our favorite stories, or the hopeful, cheerful parts, or the parts we think we understand – all of it! We pray that we will hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the scriptures in order to embrace and hold fast the hope of everlasting life given to us by the Lord Jesus.

As I began to prepare this sermon, it struck me that “all” was an important word in really hearing today’s readings. There is a lot to think about. In fact, I think we have a real scriptural roller coaster of highs and lows, ups and downs! And my stomach has never really liked roller coaster rides!

Our reading from Daniel predicts a time of anguish, “such as never has occurred since nations first came into existence.” Roller coaster, going down...

But, says Daniel, at that time will also come deliverance. Going up!

Some people will wake to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Up, and down again...

In our reading from Mark, Jesus has some not-so-cheerful things to say to his disciples when they ask him just when the temple in Jerusalem will be thrown down, and what signs they should watch for to tell them when it will happen.

Jesus doesn't precisely answer those questions. In fact, if we read on in Mark from this morning's lesson, he reminds them that the time when "heaven and earth will pass away" is known by God the Father alone.

Instead, he warns them to be watchful, so that they are not led astray by false messiahs who will come claiming to be him but in fact are not.

He tells them that wars and rumors, earthquakes and famines must take place before the end of time. Not a pleasant prospect. In fact, it sounds much like what we are presently experiencing, with pandemic, climate change, violent storms, and social dislocation. Roller coaster, way down to rock bottom!

But when we finish reading all our lessons for today, the reading from Saint Paul's letter to the Hebrews gets the roller coaster climbing again.

Paul reminds the readers of Hebrews, and us, that Jesus has redeemed us from our "sins and lawless deeds" by HIS one-time sacrifice. As baptized Christians, washed clean with pure water, we have been gifted with true hearts, confidence, and faith. That's good! Roller coaster, going up again!

Then Paul reminds us of some things WE can do day by day to keep our houses in order, and to keep the roller coaster on the climb.

First, "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful," he tells us.

Episcopal priest Amy Richter calls holding fast to hope using our "Hoping Skills." She suggests three:

First, to keep the "Big Picture Perspective" – the God's eye view of human history, rather than using only our own perspective, limited in time and space.

Second, being sure we know Scripture, which is our source (along with tradition and reason) for knowing God, and for knowing what faithfulness looks like.

Finally, she says, remember to expect trouble. But, expect Christ MORE. He has already told us that in this world we WILL have trouble. He has also told us that he has overcome the world and its troubles for us.

Then, “Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds,” says Paul.

The word “provoke” makes me stop and think. When we hear that word today, we usually think of deliberately making someone annoyed or unhappy. I remember my grandmother, a master of understatement, saying mildly “Now, that’s provoking” when things went really badly.

I think for Paul, to “provoke” each other has more the sense of spurring one another on to love each other and to do something to make troubled times better. Years ago, our lector and choir member Gary Marshal decided to add bakery bread to the canned goods Christ Church was distributing at their food pantry. He “provoked” a few other people to help with pick-up from the store bakery and delivery. Lots of bread went to Christ Church, with only one great accident – the loss of loaves that blew out of our truck on the freeway one delivery day!

Finally, Paul says, we are to keep meeting together and encourage one another!

So, today’s readings, from Daniel’s words and those of Jesus to those of Saint Paul ARE a great scriptural roller coaster ride. Read from sentence to sentence they are full of highs and lows. But if we read them and digest them as a group, we see the “Big Picture.”

In our time, as in all times, things will not always be gorgeous. In fact, things will sometimes be downright ugly. But by using our “Hoping Skills,” staying together, being encouragers, and “provoking” one another to love and good deeds, we can help keep the roller coaster running until the Lord Jesus returns.

The view from the top of the track is great! And, it gives our stomachs time to settle!!

When we do, we find that our expectations about the ultimate future are rooted in what has already been accomplished for us. We remind ourselves of it almost every week!

Christ has died.

Christ is risen.

Christ will come again.

No matter what troubles arrive on earth, God reigns, and the writer of Daniel WILL have the last word. The wise “shall shine like the brightness of the sky and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”

Amen.