

**Living in the Meantime between the Past and the Kingdom**

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**Trinity Church, Hartford**

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**The Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Proper 28, Year B**

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

**Mark 13:1-8**

**As Christians today we stand between two times: the time of the earthly ministry of Jesus and the time of the fulfillment of his promise that the Kingdom of God is at hand. Living in the middle-time or the mean-time between the proclamation of the Kingdom and its actual arrival is the challenge for Christian life today. What makes that challenge particularly difficult is that the meantime of today, which can sometimes seem quite mean indeed, is for many of us very anti-historical. We often have difficulty looking to the past for wisdom or to the future for fulfillment of our deepest longings. Many of us are very much immersed only in the present. We lack anchorage in the past and rarely are we guided by a vision of a future which could direct or inform our actions in the here and now. Henry Ford once said “history is bunk.” Those whom I would call presentists (those who find history non-instructive and irrelevant) would share that view. Think of all the ways in which obsession with the present dictates our lives: we eat and drink as if there are no long-term consequences of ingesting huge amounts of fat or sugar or alcohol. We invest our money only with an eye on the quarterly or even the weekly returns on that investment. We take risks in driving and texting because we want gratification of our desire to communicate with all our friends now, no waiting. We run up huge balances on our credit cards because we simply have to have what these credit lines will allow us to have right now without a thought to when or how we might be able to pay off our balance. We got into the financial crisis in housing that now plagues our whole society, at least to some extent, because we took out or encouraged people without means to take out mortgages we knew we and they couldn’t pay off but in the hope that the value of our homes would continue to outpace our incomes. We encourage our children who have athletic ability to cash in now on the immediate yearning for victory and success, even if it means loading our kids’ bodies with steroids, or returning them injured into games with a high risk for head and spinal injuries. We even encourage college athletes to focus solely on success on the playing fields and not in the class room because that’s where the immediate payoff is. We act only in the present for the present with a vague belief that what we do now will last or be immortalized forever.**

**And in the gospel this morning we are reminded of those in ancient Israel who built the Temple believing it would last forever. But Jesus, that old party-pooper, says “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” And we, too, have built magnificent temples, not to God perhaps, but to the mammon of wealth, power, and prestige. Tragically many of these temples have come tumbling down through acts of suicidal rage against what the perpetrators thought was the arrogance of power by the Western nations, or even as a result of shoddy building practices because it didn’t pay in the short run to build in the necessary safety precautions. We take the money and run. We have not, in many instances, built for the long run but for the short-run glorification of ourselves and our monuments to our magnificence and our power.**

**And what has been the result: Jesus reminds us that all around us are wars and rumors of wars; nation rising against nation, kingdom against kingdom, earthquakes, and famines. To that list of disasters we might add repeated acts of genocide, tribal massacres, tsunamis, hurricanes, floods, mass hunger, and the imminent threat to our eco-systems and the lives they support. Many of these catastrophes could have been avoided or at least mitigated had we paid more attention to the long-run consequences of our present actions.**

One of the great illusions of our time is that we can build and build and build and through that building mania protect ourselves against these disasters once and for all. And so when towers collapse, or dikes fail in some of our largest cities, or houses on the shore are washed away in hurricanes, our temptation is to go back and do it all over again. If they take down two trade centers let's just build more. What we don't do is think about what this craze for bigger and taller and more magnificent building activity is really for. We build the castles but we often fail to pay attention to the smaller and simpler things that can enable life to flourish within their walls. We live in a fortress America and people die within because they can't pay for routine medical examinations or because they can't afford the insurance that would enable them to pay for the treatment of their life-threatening medical conditions. We build enormous Sunday cathedrals not for worship of God but for worship of athletics and multi-millionaire athletes who are our new gods without considering what other uses that money might have been put to or what these stadiums are doing to the ecological foundations on which they are erected. We want the gigantic things now but often fail to pay attention to the small things that, if appropriately nurtured, will help us to flourish in the long run.

So we often seem trapped in the present. And that is why we need the reminder that a new time is coming: a time in which human needs and interests are properly ordered. The exact date of the arrival of this new time no one knows, and those who claim to know are always embarrassed (or ought to be) when their predictions fail to be fulfilled. But as people of God, we have an obligation to believe that new times are coming; that what we are going through now is what Jesus calls the beginning of the birth pangs of that new and fulfilled world. In the mean time we are called to remember that God has already provided an anchorage in the past as the letter to the Hebrews reminds us. God has acted so as to perfect for all time those who have been brought into a new covenant with God. God has forgiven our sins and will remember them no more. Therefore, as the writer of Hebrews says, "have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the new and living way that Jesus opened for us through the curtain." As a result of what Jesus did in the past, we can approach God with a true heart in full assurance of faith with regard to the future. And faith, in this context, means trust: trust that the word of God will not fail, that the promises of Jesus that the Kingdom of God is coming will come true. We even believe that we have intimations and first fruits of the Kingdom in our lives together in community. And with this trust we can learn to love and encourage one another, all the more, as the writer says, as we see the Day approaching.

Believing that God's promises for the future will not fail and will be realized at some point in the future, we can escape from the tyranny and illusions of short-range, immediatist, presentist thinking. We need to think ahead to what our lives might be like as we grow older, as we try to leave a habitable planet for our children and grandchildren. Of course, we cannot absolutely control the future: that is ultimately in God's hands and to believe we can determine the future absolutely is the worst kind of arrogance and pride. But we can learn to act wisely, prudently, and with greater foresight about the consequences of our present actions. We don't have to race like hares but can move forward as steady and far-thinking tortoises. Those who decide that they don't want to pay for their own health care but instead rely either on not getting sick or on the services of emergency departments at hospitals when they do, are acting as hares only for themselves with malicious lack of foresight because their medical care, should they need it, will be paid for by others. And if we as a global community don't want to pay the price now for the long-term consequences of global warming, pollution, the spread of nuclear weapons, nationalistic pretensions, failure to address the causes of world hunger, and of a broken and immoral system of medical care, then we will simply pass on the consequences of our short-sightedness multiplied beyond measure to our children and grand-children. And if presentist fears lead us to hoard what we have in the naïve hope that we can fully protect ourselves from the future then we will have forgotten the most essential lesson of our Christian faith: the lesson that we live fully only when we live in the full trust and confidence that even as we go through the birth pangs of the beginning of the new age, we go knowing that God will not ever abandon us or those whom we love. Trust in God can free us for a future that we don't have to control

**but which we can greet with assurance and faith that it is in God's hands as long as we contribute our own careful planning to its realization.**

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