

Sermon for Pentecost 26 (28C)  
November 13, 2016  
Trinity Parish, Seattle

Malachi 4:1-2a;  
Psalm 98  
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13  
Luke 21:5-19

On this next to the last Sunday of the liturgical year, we hear in the scriptures some very apocalyptic sounding warnings. The prophet Malachi says, “See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the LORD of hosts.”

Evildoers. The word conjures up memories of a movie from the 90s in which Jodie Foster plays a young woman named Nell, who was raised in the back woods of West Virginia by a reclusive, disgraced mother. She had no exposure to the outside world, and had limited facility with language. When her mother died and she was eventually exposed to the outside world, communication was difficult. But one of the words she often used was “eeba-doo-uh” – which those working with her eventually understood to be “evildoers.” It was a word she had learned from her scripture-quoting mother, and one that became an important clue to her emotional world, her fears, and to the story of her unique and tragic life.

Our five-year-old grandson has another word for it – badguys. Sebastian is five now, and in kindergarten. And apparently one of the things he’s been learning about from his friends is badguys (all one word). And from all he has heard about them, he knows one thing: he doesn’t want anything to do with them. He’s learning to read and write, and when he left our house last week after a few days with us, he had put a sign on his bedroom door that said, “No badguys!”

I think he would find some reassurance in Malachi’s prophecy that all the badguys will be stubble.

The apocalyptic writings in the scriptures operate from an understanding that things will get worse before they get better, that the coming of the Lord to bring about the promised consummation of all things and the reign of God will necessarily require some hardships, some difficult times, even some suffering. The road to progress is not a straight line, and there will be trials and tribulations. But in the end, “the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.”

And that, dear friends, is a hopeful thought for the times in which we live.

Last Tuesday night Carolyn and I hosted an election night party at our house for about 20 neighbors and friends. We imagined it would be a nice fun evening – a history-making evening! – in which we would witness the election of the country’s first woman president. That seemed like something worth celebrating. And even for those who were less than enthusiastic about the particular woman who would become our president, there was a general assumption that at least she would stop the juggernaut of the most vile, insulting, ignorant, and hate-filled bid for the presidency that any of us had ever witnessed. And that at least we would get to go on experiencing the world in more or less the same way to which we have become accustomed, even if there were things about that that were clearly disturbing and in need of serious change.

And then the numbers started coming in. We watched in disbelief as the polls and predictions proved to be so very wrong.

I do not presume to know how all of us here voted in this election. I will presume that we did not all vote exactly alike. And I will presume we all voted how we did out of convictions about what is right for our country and our communities, and hopefully also with the commitment we make in our baptism in mind – to “strive for justice and peace and to respect the dignity of every human being.” I’ve had lots of conversations this week and I’m sure you have, too, about what we see happening – lots of shock, fear, and sense of foreboding about what will happen to our country and the world! – and to all of our lives, and especially to the most vulnerable among us. I’ve heard lots of people around here reflect on “the bubble” in which we live – and mostly very glad that we do. But that bubble, it turns out, is a serious problem.

As state after state lit up red on the election map on Tuesday, including my home state of Indiana, I had to reflect on the reality of who all those people are out there in that sea of red. One of the challenges of our red and blue maps is that we easily fall into a Manichean mindset - - good and evil, red and blue, right and wrong. The reality is, of course, much more complex. We easily forget, for example, that in Kansas, which is the reddest state in the US, 42% of the people voted for President Obama in 2012.

I thought of the anger and the frustration that so many people are still feeling after years of economic stagnation and loss of income and security, and frankly, hope. I grew up in the home of an auto industry factory worker. Pretty much everyone I knew growing up worked in factories. My dad’s working life spanned an era when large-scale manufacturing and union jobs made entry into the middle class a reality for millions of people in this country. He spent the last few years of his career, though, working with robots as the factories began to go silent with human activity and the social networks that had defined his working life. The factories in central Indiana are now empty fields. Today in his mid-eighties he has a pension and health benefits

that together with income from a small business he stills runs give him a decent quality of life in a home that he owns. He was near the end of a generation where that was possible, until all those jobs went away. There are a lot of people in my hometown who, if they did not go to college have been lucky if they have had steady employment. Many work in low wage jobs, with no pension or benefits, can't afford to send their kids to college, and have to go into debt just to take a family vacation. They will be left to live on a monthly social security check in their older years. And many feel that government and our economic system have hurt them, not helped them, even as the rich get richer. They are desperate for change. Whether we're liberals or conservatives, we can no longer ignore the reality of widening inequality, and the loss of the middle class.

Many of the folks I grew up with hold conservative social values. But they're not all racists or misogynists or people who hate immigrants or gay people. They're not all deplorables. And yet, many of them have made the gamble that voting for a candidate even with some very objectionable qualities is the safer bet on their future, if only because he will surely shake things up.

These are important things for all of us to remember. After all, Malachi's prophecy was not only against the evildoers and badguys – it was also against the arrogant.

So what shall we do? Who is it that we need to become in this new reality in which we live?

Let's start with loving our neighbors as ourselves. It's not a new idea. And by neighbors I mean, yes, even those with whom we disagree about how to make the world a better place. Try sitting down and having a conversation with someone who voted differently than you. It's hard, I know! But talk until you find something you agree on, and work from there. We have to develop our capacity for empathy not only for people we agree with, but people with whom we disagree. It's hard. I know. And that's why we have to do it.

Do not cease in our work for justice and peace. As Christians we pledge ourselves in baptism to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to *strive* for justice and peace, respecting the dignity of every human being. There can be no letting up in our advocacy for those who are most at risk in this new world of ours. Many are already facing increased levels of intimidation and violence – immigrants, sexual minorities, women, climate activists – enabled by the rhetoric and the example of the man who will become our president. At coffee hour the last couple of weeks here at Trinity I counted immigrants from at least nine countries: Canada, Mexico, India, The United Arab Emirates, Congo, England, Uganda, Zambia, Indonesia, and there may have been others. We are gay, straight, transgender, men and women. We come from diverse backgrounds socio-economically, religiously, and politically, and yet, here we are together, gathering as one around this table, modeling the world God intends for us to inhabit, working

together, caring for one another. We will need to find new ways to live out this vision and to support one another in it.

We cannot sit on the sidelines. We have to be prepared to speak out and to practice costly discipleship. The rise of fascism in the 1930s in Europe was an enormous test for the Church, especially in Germany. Many simply went along because that's what we do – we don't want to make waves or provoke controversy. Some were so acculturated to the idea that the church and the state speak with one voice that they didn't even notice when the church had completely lost its voice and its identity, silent in the face of a growing threat to humanity. The German theologian and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, chose rather to live a life of costly discipleship. He lived according to his convictions and what he deeply believed it meant to follow Christ, eventually facing prison and the concentration camps. He was hanged just days before the Allies liberated his camp at the end of the war. Bonhoeffer was a naturally reserved man, a pastor and sort of brainy theologian who lived mostly in his head. But he stood up against the Nazis, criticized Hitler publicly and called upon Germany's state church to repent of its anti-Semitism and to refuse to allow itself to be used by the Nazis. His writings in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* and *The Cost of Discipleship* have inspired Christians from then until now to reimagine what it means to truly follow Christ, as he did when he saw Jews being rounded up and taken to camps. We do not yet know whether some of the threats made in the presidential campaign to round up millions of undocumented immigrants will hold or not, but we cannot afford to be passive if they do. We have much to learn from Bonhoeffer's example.

And finally, we must be a place of refuge for those who face injustice and discrimination. The red doors of Episcopal and Anglican churches around the world have often been a sign of refuge and sanctuary – a place where one may go to be safe in the face of danger. Let's (continue to) make Trinity Parish a place of safety for all who flee persecution and danger.

Jesus talked with his disciples about the many perils they would face – arrests, persecution, prison, betrayals – hatred for their love of him. He said it would be an opportunity to testify to the hope that lay within them. And no matter how bad things got, he said, "By your endurance you will gain your souls."

There is much that is uncertain before us, and we do not know where it will lead. But we do know that our Lord Jesus Christ calls us into a new way of life that stands in contrast to the world around us, a way that invites us all into a realm of love and mutuality and justice and peace for all. And to that new way we must again commit ourselves, body, soul, and spirit.