

Sermon - 08-14-22
Ps 80; Is 5:1-7; He 11:29-12:2 Lu 12:49-56
Interpreting the Present Time
10th Sun after Pentecost

Much ink has flowed from the musings and predictions of worldly philosophers, worldly prophets and pundits about what is going to happen next in our world. We have been endowed with some wisdom as human beings. True wisdom originates with our Creator God – the very source of life. And true wisdom comes with taking in the Word of God concerning what Jesus calls “how to interpret the present time.” The late Karl Barth, one of the most influential theologians of the 20th century, put it this way: “Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.” (religionunplugged.com 08-08-22)

God determines the rise and fall of nations (Job 12:23). What we may think are chance happenings are truly in God’s hand -- and matters unfold according to God’s will. We fool ourselves when we believe in luck. It is especially unwise to depend on luck.

Isaiah’s unfavorable prophecy for Israel’s future derives directly from God’s most beloved nation’s disobedience. They have turned away from their Creator and toward idols. Isaiah’s vineyard represents Israel and Judah, so carefully and lovingly established by God. The fruit that comes from this vineyard has become worthless. Therefore, God is about to destroy it. Please notice that God tells the Prophet Isaiah what He is about to do to the vineyard (v 5). Elsewhere God spoke through Isaiah: (*I am*) “Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, ‘My plan will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure’; (Is 46:10)

Scripture reveals this understanding – true knowledge – a right worldview -- the Creator God is sovereign. God sees the end from the beginning. You and I don’t. God’s mind encompasses all wisdom. Ours does not. Here is the most precious and powerful disclosure in the Bible: God intervenes often abruptly – sometimes shockingly – in order to draw His beloved people back to Himself. Do we always stray? Do we always need to be reminded how much God loves us? The Bible answer is yes and yes. Our fallen nature always tugs at our desire to be near to and to please our God.

Human devices and even our best efforts do not keep us safe or protected from the troubles of the world. The news of the day -- the struggles of nations and peoples – in the newspaper or on the radio, tv or social media frightens us. We worry, we get anxious – we even cry over the tragedies unfolding in the nations, especially in our own nation.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews recites the glorious roll call of heroes of the faith who experienced violence and persecution thousands of years ago. Some of the stories – Moses’ in the Exodus, David’s military campaigns, the struggles of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah -- all have parallels throughout human history. In our own time there are courageous leaders. There are cruel dictators. Believers are still tortured for their faith.

We live in a kind of cocoon of safety in our country. We have established institutions that guard us. Enforcement agencies and courts have real power to help when we are threatened. It is not the same in many nations of the world. Imagine living in an African or South American country where there is no 911 to call. How can you protect your family, your property, your job when Boko Haran or Al-Qaida swoops in and takes everything, kidnapping, stealing or even murdering at will?

Even lacking great wisdom, godly people stay close to our Creator God when trials, testing and troubles happen. From Moses all the way to Jesus Christ, the saints find strength and favor through their faith and trust in God.

Listen to this story from Nigeria:

Habila Adamu and his family were awakened by pounding on the front door of their simple home in northern Nigeria. It was 11 p.m. The pounding was followed by the sound of men yelling for Habila to come out. When he entered the front room with his wife, Vivian, and their young son close behind, he faced intruders wearing robes and masks. One

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was armed with an AK-47. Habila said a short prayer to the Lord.

They announced that they were there to do the work of Allah. They began to question Habila, asking his name, his profession, and whether he was Christian or Muslim.

“I am a Christian,” he replied.

The men were members of Boko Haram.

The intruders told Habila that they were giving him the chance to live — and live a better life — if he would only become a Muslim, professing, “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger”. They even asked him to join them in Boko Haram.

All the while, Habila was prepared to die. “I am a Christian and will always remain a Christian,” he replied, “even to death.”

Turning to Vivian, one of the men said, “If your husband does not cooperate with us, you will watch him die.”

“Don’t worry,” Habila told his wife as the rifle was aimed at his head. “The death of a Christian is a great gain, not a loss.” The men looked back at Vivian and demanded that she bring them all the money they had. She scoured the rooms of their small home, grabbing anything of value that she could find in hope that the men would be satisfied and spare her husband’s life. But it wasn’t enough.

The man with the AK-47 placed the barrel next to Habila’s mouth. “Since you refuse to become a Muslim,” he said, “here is your reward!” He pulled the trigger.

Habila fell to the floor, blood streaming from his face. Vivian cried out in horror.

“Shut up, woman!” yelled one of the attackers. “If you try to get help, we will find you and kill you and your child.” The men kicked Habila’s leg to be sure he was dead. Satisfied that they had done Allah a service, they chanted, “*Allahu Akbar* [Allah is great]!” and left the house.

Minutes passed, and the pool of blood expanded around Habila’s body. As Vivian cried over her husband, she heard him gasp, “I am still alive. Please get help.”

Her heart filled with hope as she rose quickly from the floor, running for help.

During that attack, Boko Haram raided the homes of more than 30 members of Habila’s church. All of them refused to convert to Islam, choosing to die rather than turn their backs on Christ. Habila and his family were the only survivors.

Habila was transferred to several hospitals in an attempt to get him the medical attention he needed. When his medical records were later reviewed, a medical worker said that it was only by God’s grace that he survived.

Habila was scheduled to undergo a bone graft to repair his cheekbone, which was destroyed by the bullet. But before doctors began the operation, they were shocked to see that his cheekbone had healed. There was no need for the graft.

Habila continues to share his testimony with others. When a VOM worker asked him how he feels about those who shot him, he said, “We are (all) condemned criminals. ... Christ died for us. ... He loves us. That’s why we must show that love to the people that hate us. Since that day, I pray, ‘God, forgive them. God, forgive them.’ I pray that [they will know the truth and] be saved, not to be condemned. I love them.

When asked how he could forgive the men who tried to kill him, Habila replied, “Because Christ is love. The God I am serving is love. ... He commands us to love each other.”

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Habila refused to deny Christ when faced with death.

The same divine help is there for us when we “look to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” (He 12:2) Imagine having no other help than the power of God in Christ. Truly the presence of the Holy Spirit in you is your greatest protection. Amen.