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11/15/2009, Pentecost 24B  
Daniel 12:1-3, Mark 13:1-8  
The End Times

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

My text this morning is from our First Lesson, from Daniel 12. We read this:

<sup>2</sup>And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. (Daniel 12:2, RSV)

In the year of our Lord 1542, Martin Luther wrote the preface to a collection of hymns. It was a limited collection of hymns, meant especially for funerals. That year was an awfully sad year for Martin and his wife, Katie, for they were grieving the death of their fourteen-year old daughter, Magdalene. In his *Preface to the Burial Hymns*, Luther expressed his conviction that burial hymns should not be downcast or woeful, but rather radiant with the hope of the resurrection. And so, we read this, for example:

Nor do we sing any dirges or doleful songs over our dead and at the grave, but comforting hymns of the forgiveness of sins, of rest, sleep, life, and of the resurrection of departed Christians so that our faith may be strengthened and the people be moved to true devotion. For it is meet and right that we should conduct these funerals with proper decorum in order to honor and praise that joyous article of our faith, namely, the resurrection of the dead, and in order to defy Death, that terrible foe who so shamefully and in so many horrible ways goes on to devour us. (Preface to the Burial Hymns, 1542)

Later on in that essay, he expressed his opinion about tombstones and about encouraging verses of scripture that could well be engraved on them. He has a long list of such Bible verses, including this morning's text from Daniel:

<sup>2</sup>And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. (Daniel 12:2, RSV)

As Luther grieved for his daughter, it comforted him to believe what the Church believes, that death is not victorious over Christians, that miserable death does not have the final word, that those who sleep in death will one day be awakened, and that eternity beckons to us.

A new movie opened this weekend called “2012.” It is an apocalyptic science-fiction movie starring John Cusack and Amanda Peet. The date, 2012, refers to an ancient Mayan prophecy that the world will come to an end on December 21, 2012. Mercy! That’s not too far off! A little more than three years. The movie opened this past Friday, and naturally, Carol and I rushed out to see it. We’re no fools. We wanted to see what’s gonna happen to this old world of ours!

It is fascinating, this human attraction for terrifying descriptions of the end of things. Well, let me tell you, judging by this movie, horrifying things happen, including tidal waves and geographical disruptions, the Sistine Chapel cracks in half and Saint Peter’s Basilica tumbles over on people. Even our Empire State Building comes crashing down.

Well, our Bible readings for this morning share in this frightening picture of the end time. The Daniel reading, for example, speaks of unprecedented troubles:

“At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time... (Daniel 12:1, RSV)

And in our Gospel Lesson, Jesus speaks of the rise of deceivers and of wars and other troubles:

<sup>5</sup>And Jesus began to say to them, “Take heed that no one leads you astray. <sup>6</sup>Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. <sup>7</sup>And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is not yet. <sup>8</sup>For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places, there will be famines; this is but the beginning of the birth-pangs. (Mark 13:5-8, RSV)

And then, “my Lord, what a mornin’, when da stars begin to fall.” (from this morning’s Offering Anthem)

The difference between the movie and the Bible is in our Lord’s last word there, “birth-pangs.” I was with Carol for the birth of both of our boys. I know something of birth pangs, though my knowing falls far short of Carol’s knowing.

Let me borrow a paragraph from Carol's sermon for this morning, the sermon she is preaching up there at The Wartburg:

As I think back more than twenty years ago when my children were born, I try to remember what those birth pangs were like. What a mixture of excitement, anticipation, fear and trepidation I felt! I remember getting to the point of impatience - hoping that the labor would start, no matter how much it hurt. At the back of my mind there were questions: Will my baby be OK? Will it be a boy or a girl? Will I be able to withstand the pain? What will it be like to be a mother? Will I be good at it? Will I know what to do? How long will it take to recover? How much is this going to hurt? I hope I can do it without a shot in my spine! Can't wait to get this baby out of my belly!

As for me, I can give this testimony: Carol's birth pangs gave way to the most profound joy we have ever known: the life of our boys.

Likewise, when the Bible speaks of the end of time and of trials and tribulations before those times, the Bible also speaks of a great hope, of everlasting life and of light:

<sup>3</sup>And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.

Still there is a distinction to be noted concerning the end times -- a distinction as serious as death! The Bible speaks not only of the Day of the Lord and resurrection of the dead, but also of a sorting out among people, such that some rise to life, but others to sorrow:

<sup>2</sup>And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. (Daniel 12:2, RSV)

The *Jewish Study Bible* points out that this is the only passage in the Old Testament that clearly speaks of individual resurrection. For example, the great story in the 37th Chapter of Ezekiel about the Valley of Dry Bones could be interpreted as a metaphor for the rising up of the defeated community of Israel. Other passages in the Old Testament can be interpreted along similar lines, either as communal in nature or as referring to the trials and rescues *within* our earthly life. But not this passage, this passage from Daniel 12. It speaks of individual life and judgment beyond the grave.

And as the *Jewish Study Bible* notes, this doctrine of the resurrection of the body is an important teaching within the Christian faith.

The New Testament does indeed teach the resurrection of the body and our great encounter with Jesus in which we must give an account of ourselves and of how we have lived. Let me remind you of some of those passages.

To begin, let us note that the preaching of Jesus is filled with the divine dimension. It is natural for the mind to think of heaven, for example, in our Lord's saying about treasure:

<sup>19</sup>Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: <sup>20</sup>But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: <sup>21</sup>For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Matthew 6:19-21, KJV)

We face a choice: treasure on earth or treasure in heaven. The final Day will reveal the choices we are making day by day.

Let us not forget the *divine interest* in how you and I live these years entrusted to us:

<sup>13</sup>Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. <sup>14</sup>For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few...<sup>24</sup>“Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; <sup>25</sup>and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. <sup>26</sup>And every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; <sup>27</sup>and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it.” (Matthew 7:13-14, 24-27, RSV)

In interpreting the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13:24-30), Jesus quotes from our Daniel 12 text, including judgment on how we have lived:

<sup>41</sup>The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; <sup>42</sup>And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. <sup>43</sup>Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.

(Matthew 13:41-43, KJV)

And when Jesus is teaching the way of the Cross, do we dare dismiss his words about “losing one’s soul”?

<sup>34</sup>And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. <sup>35</sup>For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel’s, the same shall save it. <sup>36</sup>For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? <sup>37</sup>Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? <sup>38</sup>Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. (Mark 8:34-38, KJV)

St. Paul is a great teacher of the resurrection of the dead and of judgment according to works. Consider some of his words from his Epistle to the Romans:

<sup>3</sup>Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? <sup>4</sup>Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? <sup>5</sup>But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed. <sup>6</sup>For he will repay according to each one’s deeds: <sup>7</sup>to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; <sup>8</sup>while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. (Romans 2:3-8, NRSV)

<sup>10</sup>Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God; <sup>11</sup>for it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.” <sup>12</sup>So each of us shall give account of himself to God. (Romans 14:10-12, RSV)

Next we have a saying of St. Paul I especially love because it combines straightforward proclamation of the last judgment with confidence in Christ, as if to say, “Bring it on. I trust Jesus!”

<sup>8</sup>We are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. <sup>9</sup>So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. <sup>10</sup>For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body. (2 Corinthians 5:8-10, RSV)

The final judgment will be impartial:

<sup>23</sup>Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, <sup>24</sup>since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. <sup>25</sup>For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality. (Colossians 3:23-25, NRSV)

Any one of these passages is worthy of a sermon. In fact, I could easily do a Lent series on such passages. And there are plenty more like them in the New Testament, asking us to reckon with the Last Day and trying to stir us up to holiness of life in anticipation of our great encounter with Jesus.

Meanwhile, I believe that everything we need is expressed in today's Second Lesson, from Hebrews Chapter 10. We have the doctrine of Justification by Faith in the form of the final and complete sacrifice of Jesus Christ, our great high priest:

<sup>12</sup>But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, "he sat down at the right hand of God," <sup>13</sup>and since then has been waiting "until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet." <sup>14</sup>For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified... (Hebrews 10:12-14, NRSV)

And so it is that we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ and his sufficient sacrifice. We are justified by faith apart from works.

And yet works remain necessary for the redeemed. We still face the final Day, our true life is still a life "in Christ," and this time leading up to the final Day should be a time of piety and love:

<sup>24</sup>And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, <sup>25</sup>not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:24-25, NRSV)

This is why I am glad that we have a contribution envelope for The Salvation Army in today's worship folder. It seems to me they try to walk along these lines, "provoking one another to love and good deeds."

That is, let us continue on the path you have already commenced: worship and piety. Let us love God and our neighbors, till the day dawns and Jesus comes again. To him be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.