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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
11/13/2011, Pentecost 22A
Zephaniah 1:7-18, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Matthew 25:14-30

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

My beginning text this morning is from our Second Lesson, from 1 Thessalonians 5. It is the famous verse about Jesus coming again “like a thief in the night.” Let me set the stage a little bit before I read the full verse aloud for us.

Many Bible scholars take St. Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians to be the earliest letter in the New Testament, from about a quarter of a century after the resurrection of Jesus. So, this letter to the Thessalonians is a very early apostolic letter. Still, a quarter of a century is quite a long time. The early Christians had hoped that Easter meant that Jesus would *soon* come again, in beauty and power this time, and drive sin, death, and the devil right out of the world. So, they waited for Jesus with eager expectation. So, do we, all these centuries later. In my text, St. Paul assures the Thessalonians that Jesus is indeed coming again. He will come suddenly, which will be a joyful thing for those who have been waiting and hoping for him. Here, then, is my text. St. Paul writes this:

¹Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. ²For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. (1 Thessalonians 5:1-2, NRSV)

The genesis of this morning’s sermon was a passing thought I had when I heard the news that Steve Jobs had died. I rather liked Steve Jobs, a co-founder of Apple Incorporated. I liked his creativity and energy, his attention to beauty, and his ability to gather brilliant people around him and inspire them all to create wonders of technology.

Like many people, I knew that he was sick, struggling for life. Still, it surprised me when I heard that he had died, and I found myself thinking this passing thought: “Well, now Steve Jobs gets to meet and bend the knee before Someone even smarter than he is!” I mean Jesus Christ -- your Saviour, my Saviour. Steve Jobs gets to meet Someone a lot smarter than he is.

That Steve Jobs will meet and bend the knee before Jesus I take as quite certain. For one thing, Jesus is risen, with power over life and death, and so we are bound to run into him someday. This universe just isn’t big enough that we could hide from him, not even in the grave.

But beyond these thoughts, we have the testimony of the Bible. It is most clear in St. Paul’s Letter to the Philippians, Chapter Two:

⁹Therefore God has highly exalted him [Christ Jesus] and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰that at the name of Jesus *every knee* should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and *every tongue* confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11, RSV)

Each of us, I bet, has some notion of what that will be like -- this united bending of the knee before Jesus. In this sermon, let me share some of my notions about what it will be like for each and every one of us to bend the knee before Jesus. My main idea is that there will be a tremendous variety among us, but that Jesus will handle us well. We will constitute a sea of people, a great multitude of folk, all stepping up one at a time for a good long pastoral conversation with Jesus. And my theme is that Jesus has enough goodness and wisdom to deal with each of us just right! What that means for people condemned by all the world, like Hitler or Stalin, I do not know. We must leave that to Jesus. But I am fully persuaded that that Jesus will deal with each of us according to his goodness and wisdom, and that is trustworthy and something to prepare for.

So, let's imagine some famous people in history bending the knee before Jesus. I will speak of three or four of my favorite people of all time. In your imagination, you can choose some of your own favorite people.

So, here are three of my heroes: Einstein, Beethoven, and St. John Chrysostom. I mean to speak of them, and to end by speaking of one more of my heroes: you!

FIRST, A WORD OR TWO ABOUT EINSTEIN

First, let me say a word or two about Einstein. Back in college days, the physics I studied was mostly Newtonian physics. I loved it. If ever there was smart man on this earth, I think Newton was the one. But I also had a brief introduction to Einstein. There was a time, back in my college days, when I could generate the famous formula $E=mc^2$. I understood the logic of it. I understood its historic connection with the Michelson–Morley experiments. I've forgotten all those things, but I've retained the wonderful impression that Einstein was on to something BIG -- that of all scientists privileged to get to know something of the mind of God through study of the regularities by which our Maker rules his creation... that of all of them, Einstein was the greatest.

Sin disrupted the daily conversation between Adam and Eve and the Lord. When it did that, our human intellect suffered a terrible blow. Even Einstein was just beginning his craft. Compared to Jesus, Einstein's mathematics was childlike, his conceptuality was blunt, and he had miles and miles to go in grasping the truth of God's creation. Still, compared to the rest of us, what a bright student Einstein was, what a promising one he was! I bet that Jesus is going to take delight in teaching Einstein about the universe. They will do some fascinating work together, I am sure.

BEETHOVEN

Second, Beethoven. I have seen manuscripts of music composed by Mozart and by Beethoven at The Pierpont Morgan Library. There they lay, side by side, and the matter is pretty much as the movie “Amadeus” describes it. The work of Mozart is calm and error free, as if his creativity flowed easily and deeply, while the manuscripts of Beethoven are a mess! He scribbles, he scratches out, he refines, he labors on. But oh! what a destination he reaches through his labors! For me, Beethoven is the greatest composer.

But picture Beethoven kneeling before Jesus and having a good long pastoral conversation with our Lord. In his earthly life, Beethoven was often impatient with musicians. When one of the musicians trying to prepare for a Beethoven string quartet complained that one particularly hazardous passage was unplayable, Beethoven screamed...

Do you think that I care for your damned fiddle when the spirit seizes me?¹

But the thing is, compared to the musical genius of Beethoven’s Maker, Beethoven’s own music is like chop sticks. No, Beethoven has many good miles to go with Jesus in refining Beethoven’s art. Glad to say, Jesus is a more generous and patient teacher than Beethoven seems to have been.

MICHELANGELO

Likewise with Michelangelo. The one who could sculpt The David is but a child drawing lines in the mud compared to the One who made David in the first place -- indeed the One who created each of us “fearfully and wonderfully made” ones.

ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

Now let me speak of a saint -- my favorite saint, John Chrysostom. He is called “Golden Tongued,” and many church historians point to him as the greatest preacher of them all, next to Jesus. And that’s the thing: Compared to Jesus, even Chrysostom has just barely begun to learn his craft. He was well-trained in rhetoric, deeply immersed in the Bible, endowed with powers of eloquence beyond anyone else’s I have ever read or heard, but imagine Chrysostom kneeling before the one who is The Word himself -- the very Word by which all was made and without whom nothing was made that was made. (John 1) The angels and the archangels have been praising the Triune God since the beginning of time. Chrysostom has miles to go to catch up to their eloquence. But he is a promising

¹ From the notes accompanying the cd of The Orford Quartet, Beethoven, Op 59 and Op 95.

student. He has something good to bring before the throne of Jesus on that great and awesome final judgment.

YOU AND ME

Finally let me speak of some heroes closer at hand. I mean you and me. We will not be excluded from that great congregation that kneels before Jesus someday. We will have our turn.

How shall we prepare for that? What strength should we be trying to develop? What beginning can we make on good work to be continued in the Kingdom to come?

Well, the three people I mentioned - Einstein, Beethoven, and Chrysostom - all bring to the last judgment lives of accomplishment in their particular specialties. Nothing for them to be ashamed of in that. If they had specialized in sin, then there will be much for them to be ashamed of, but not, I think, in the areas of science, music, and preaching.

Likewise with you: you have your own individual complex of talent, opportunity, and responsibility. And underlying them all is the one gift St. Paul says we all have: the gift of love. We read about this in St. Paul's famous Thirteenth Chapter of First Corinthians:

¹If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. (1 Corinthians 13:1, RSV)

Time spend in love will never be wasted. There will be nothing to be ashamed of when we kneel before Jesus if we can truly report that, whatever else we tried to do, we also tried to love God and our neighbor.

In today's text, St. Paul hints at the same thing. There is a remarkable calmness in Paul as he writes about the return of Jesus "like a thief in the night." Paul does not seem alarmed by that. In fact, his discussion of our Lord's return is a rather peaceful interlude in a long passage in which he urges the Thessalonians to be people of peace and goodness. Such exhortations flank this morning's readings about the return of our Lord.

So, for example, in the chapter just before our reading from 1 Thessalonians 5, we read this call to goodness:

⁹Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; ¹⁰and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more, ¹¹to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, ¹²so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one. (1 Thessalonians 4:1-12, NRSV)

The apostle speaks of the kinds of things that you and I are capable of doing: to love one another, to live quietly, to contribute to the commonwealth as best we can.

And then, following our text, St. Paul again turns to ways of life accessible to you and to me:

...Be at peace among yourselves. ¹⁴And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. ¹⁵See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. ¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise the words of prophets, ²¹but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²²abstain from every form of evil.

And that is about the end of the letter. St. Paul adds his benediction, and that is the end. As far as he is concerned the return of Christ is simply a reason to occupy ourselves with good works. The wisdom of today's Psalm 90 seems entirely right in view of Paul's Letter:

¹⁰ The span of our life is seventy years, perhaps in strength | even
eighty;*
yet the sum of them is but labor and sorrow,
for they pass away quickly and | we are gone...
¹² So teach us to num- | ber our days,*
that we may apply our | hearts to wisdom. (Psalm 90, LBW)

My wife, Carol's, favorite New Testament character, the Samaritan woman at the well, had her pastoral conversation with Jesus. It was not easy-going, given her extraordinary domestic history, but she came out of it better than she was before. Likewise, St. Peter had his tough pastoral conversation with his resurrected Lord. That conversation certainly was not an easy going one at points, for Peter had reason to deeply regret that he had denied Jesus three times over, yet Peter came out of that conversation better than he was beforehand. Indeed, Peter came out of it ready to be an apostle, a saint, and a rock for the Church.

Likewise with you and me. One day, we will bend the knee before Jesus, along with Einstein, Beethoven, Chrysostom, Peter, and so many before us. Let us use the years remaining to us to "apply our hearts unto wisdom," and to bear with dignity the name of Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.