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Daniel 12:1-3, Psalm 16, Hebrews 10:11-25, Mark 13:1-8  
The Book!

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

We are fast approaching the end of the liturgical year. The season of Advent is soon upon us. As for this Season after Pentecost, it is like an old person gently releasing grip on the bustle of day-to-day life and starting to look heavenward: our lectionary has grown old, nearing its end, and the drift of our Bible readings now inclines toward the end times. We hear this note clearly in today's Prayer of the Day:

Lord God, so rule and govern our hearts and minds by your Holy Spirit that, always keeping in mind *the end of all things and the day of judgment*, we may be stirred up to holiness of life here and may live with you forever in the world to come, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

If life is not yet right, now is the time to start making amends. This end of the liturgical year always invites us to broaden our perspective, to more earnestly consider the divine dimension, and to start reckoning with the Book!

By "the Book," I do not now mean the "Good Book," the Bible. That book - the Bible - is always a book to be cherished. There is no season in which we might well neglect it, no stage of life in which we can safely set it aside. No, when I say that this dwindling liturgical year invites us to start reckoning with the Book, I do not mean the Bible, but rather the Book of Life in which, by God's grace, our names are entered.

Our First Lesson, from Daniel 12, speaks of this Book:

There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in *the book*. (Daniel 12:1b, NRSV)

If this were the only reference to *the book* to be found in the Bible, perhaps we could put the phrase down to poetic imagery. But, surprisingly, mention of *the book* recurs in the Bible, from beginning to end. I say "surprisingly" because the whole idea *the book* is not much lifted up in theology or the catechism or

Sunday School. Still, it is part of the Bible, and I find myself rather liking it. I find it a helpful teaching for both the comfort of the Gospel and the call to holiness of life.

So, let's begin by quickly tracing the idea of *the book* through Holy Scripture. A strange thing about the idea is that wherever it occurs, it seems to have no lecture associated with it. The word simply springs forward, as if its meaning should be obvious. And indeed, its meaning does seem pretty clear.

The first reference to *the book* in the second book of the Bible, Exodus. Moses says this to the LORD:

<sup>32</sup>But now, if thou wilt, forgive their sin -- and if not, blot me, I pray thee, *out of thy book* which thou hast written."

<sup>33</sup>But the LORD said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me, him will I blot out of *my book*. (Exodus 32:32-22, RSV)

Mischief has been afoot while Moses was up on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments from the LORD. When Moses comes down the mountain, he finds the people have demanded that a golden calf be fashioned for them. They are dancing, they are naked, and Moses becomes furious at the sight:

And it came to pass, as soon as he came nigh unto the camp, that he saw the calf, and the dancing: and Moses' anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount. (Exodus 32:19, KJV)

But for all his anger, Moses pleads with the LORD to not destroy the people. Moses makes a very moving appeal, a Christ-like appeal: he protects the people by offering his own death for their life: "... and if [thou wilt not forgive], blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book..."

Next, in the Psalms we find two references to *the book*—one in Psalm 69 (verse 28) and one in Psalm 139. Let me read the one from Psalm 139 to you. As I do so, take it to heart for yourself, and in doing so, be pleased to think that our Maker has had his loving eye on you even from the beginning, even when you were but a child in the womb:

<sup>16</sup>Thy eyes beheld my unformed substance; in *thy book* were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. (Psalm 139:16, RSV)

Next, I refer to another passage in Daniel. Today's First Lesson about *the book* is from Daniel 12. But before that, in Daniel 7, there is another reference to it:

<sup>9</sup>As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne, his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire. <sup>10</sup>A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence. A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgment, and *the books* were opened. (Daniel 7:9-10, NRSV)

Hastening on, let me lift up two passages from the New Testament. The first one is a saying of our Lord Jesus. He has sent seventy of his disciples out on a preaching mission. They have returned to him, all excited by the healings and ministry they have done. Jesus encourages them to be even more excited about *the book*:

<sup>18</sup>And [Jesus] said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. <sup>19</sup>Behold, I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing shall hurt you. <sup>20</sup>Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you; but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." (Luke 10:18-20, RSV)

Finally, we have a verse from the book of Revelation, Chapter 20. St. John records his vision of the great and final day:

<sup>12</sup>And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and *books* were opened. Also another book was opened, which is the *book of life*. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done. (Revelation 20:12, RSV)

So, that's a brief survey of some mentions of *the book* in the Bible.

## **BEAUTIFUL BOOKS**

Now I know that we live in a digital age. But I bet that many of you still like the weight of a good, old-fashioned book in your hands. In fact, some of you have books you treasure, I am quite sure. They might be dog-eared by now.

They might have passages underlined that you would not underline now that you are older, but still, you cherish the book. Some of your books are beautiful. I hope that you have a beautiful copy of the Bible, for example. Let it have leather bonding, India paper, gold edges, red ribbons, and chief of all, let it be the King James Version, for a beauty of language befitting the beauty and dignity of our faith. But that's just one man's opinion. Other versions of the Bible are good too. But whatever version you like, try to include a beautiful edition of the Bible among your books.

Let me tell you about a couple great books I've seen, to start building up momentum toward a discussion of the big book, the Book of Life. The first of these earthy, but grand books on my mind is the great book of matriculation at General Theological Seminary, in Chelsea, here in Manhattan. As with many liturgies at General, the matriculation ceremony is solemn and grand. One by one, beginning seminarians are led forward to sign the great matriculation book. Two of our people here at Immanuel have recently signed that book: James Miller, who begins his studies toward ordination in the Holy Ministry, and Kelly-Ray Meritt who has been ordained for a good long time, but is now commencing his studies for a Masters of Sacred Theology in the field of Spiritual Direction. My wife, Carol, signed that same great book at General a decade earlier, when she too started her STM studies in Spiritual Direction. It must be a moving experience to be led forward, given a pen, and enter your John Hancock in that same book where so many other clergy, theologians, and parish teachers have entered their names beforehand.

The second book on my mind is actually closer to my image of the Book of Life. It is the Baptismal registry at Redeemer Lutheran Church up in the Bronx. One of my favorite young clergy, Rev. Dien Taylor, places a lectern at the Baptismal font, there in the center aisle. I take it that when grown-ups are baptized, they are invited to enter their names into that book. It is beautifully bound, and again, it is a moving thing to page backwards through all those signatures, to imagine those good folks, and to feel unity with the Communion of Saints at that place.

Now, I bet all congregations have Baptism registers. Here at Immanuel, we have them going back to our founding year, 1863. We keep such registers in the safe, and we love them and guard them. Why? Well, among other reasons, there is this big reason: When the Bible speaks of the Book of Life, it is natural to wonder whose names are recorded in that Book. In particular, it is natural to wonder whether *our* names are registered there—your name and my name. Right? If there is a Book of Life, I sure want my name recorded there!

I mean, the days of anguish spoken of in today's Bible Lessons are coming. For all we know, the days of wars and rumors of wars, of earthquakes and famines, and the antichrist are soon upon us. And if those last days do not

overtake us, still, err long, our days will be done and death will take us. So, it is relevant to us: Are *our* names in that dear Book of Life?

Probably there are more names recorded in heaven's Book than in all the parish registers this old earth has ever known. Still, if your name is in a baptismal register in some safe here on earth, be pleased to think of that register as an earthy image of that great heavenly Book. Think of your Baptismal certificate as an icon that stretches all the way to heaven. The entering of your name on the certificate means the entering of your name in heaven. And if you have heard of the goodness of the Lord and if promises have been spoken to you in the name of Jesus and you have not rejected those promises, then be confident that your name is in yon Book of Life. Let yourself be moved by this. Take it to heart. As surely as you are baptized, you are definitely part of heaven's business. As surely as you belong to Christ, you are part of the heavenly agenda on the Great and Final Day.

## **HOLINESS OF LIFE**

So far I have been speaking of the Book of Life and the hope it gives us. Now, let's shift to another book, the Book of our Deeds, and be encouraged onwards toward holiness of life.

In this morning's Gospel Lesson, Jesus speaks of the Great and Final Day. His words are solemn. This old world is in store for some upheavals. Even the preliminary events preceding the Great Day are troubling:

<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.

I suppose that every generation of the church hears of such troubles and applies them to itself. Rightfully so. I should think we too can hear of wars and rumors of wars and earthquakes and famines and strange Hurricane Sandys assaulting us in ways we are not used to and thinking to ourselves that maybe we are caught up even now in the birth-pangs of which Jesus spoke. And give us credit for this: we are closer to the Great and Final day than any other generation before us. Much closer! In all the two thousand year history of the church, we are closer to the end than our ancestors in the faith.

But one thing is quite certain: whether we are now in the midst of the birth-pangs of the endtime or not, still it is high time to become serious about matters of sin, repentance, and hope, for we must each reckon with The Book. Even better, we must each reckon with the One who shall speak to us about the

contents of that Book. As certainly as our Saviour lives, we shall find the word of life for us in that Book. But I cannot help but think we are in for some serious pastoral conversation with our Lord about the other matters recorded in that Book: the deeds and content of our lives.

I admit that I cannot figure out how this all is going to work together. I simply want to pass on the teaching of the Bible as best I can, whether I can solve all mysteries or not. How is Jesus going to both save us and judge our lives? How can there be both a Book of Life and a Book of Our Deeds?

And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they *had done*. (Revelation 20:12, RSV)

## RETURNING TO OUR PRAYER OF THE DAY

Let's end where we began—with this morning's Prayer of the Day. It is an exceedingly rich prayer, holding in unity thoughts that sometimes fly apart. The first thing we could well note is that this opening prayer is indeed a *prayer*. It deals with solemn matters of "the end of all things and the day of judgment," of salvation and holiness of life, and it begins in the best way possible: with a cry to the Lord. The prayer has heavy subjects in view and so begins with a cry that the Lord would conquer us and rule us:

Lord God, *so rule and govern* our hearts and minds by your Holy Spirit...

Next, the prayer feels itself duty bound, as it were, to acknowledge one of the *means* used by the Holy Spirit: the solemn thought of the final reckoning:

... that, always keeping in mind *the end of all things and the day of judgment*...

This prayer, we see, does not want to shy away from the notion of the Day of Judgment. The prayer imagines that how we live our lives, day by day, matters—yes, matters to heaven and heaven's Lord. The prayer does not want to pretend that our sins are insignificant, nor that the divine exhortations of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and the apostolic exhortations of St. Paul, St. Peter, and St. James are somehow unreal or do not apply to us. The prayer is very much in the spirit of Bonhoeffer's soul-searching observation about "costly grace":

Above all, it is *costly* because it cost God the life of his Son; “ye were bought with a price,” and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us.<sup>1</sup>

Next, the prayer phrases a very sensible petition: If we must face the end of all things and the Day of Judgment, then we need God’s help now to prepare for that:

...[that] we may be stirred up to holiness of life here

The saints seem to be the one who take this petition seriously. They not only pray to “be stirred up to holiness of life,” but they also set out to live in ways that cohere with the prayer.

Finally, the prayer speaks of the goal of holiness of life. It speaks of a yearning to dwell with Christ for ever:

...and may live with you forever in the world to come,  
through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

A vigorous “Amen” is due such a prayer, I should think.

God bless all Kings, Presidents, Senators and such around the world. Their work is awfully important and they deserve our prayers. But for the rest of us, there is action aplenty too, good work awaiting us, in the simple things of this morning’s Prayer: that we will take thought of the end of all things and the day of judgment and that in taking thought of the end, we will be stirred up even now to holiness of life, and look forward with hope to life forever with our Saviour Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Revised Edition (Macmillan Publishing Company: New York, 1963, translated from the German first published in 1937), page 48.