

The Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost
November 6, 2016

"THIS PROJECT ON TIME"
by Mary Anne Biggs

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5 ~ Luke 20:27-38

When John and I lived in Texas I would drive down the highway every day on my way home from work, and I would see this half built structure looming on the side of the road. It was obvious that the builders ran out of funds in mid-project, or lost their zoning dispute, or got tied up in court, or something, because the structure looked half built/half run down ... a shell ... a shadow ... a ruin. The weeds had grown up around it and it was impossible even to tell what it was going to be. Some sort of office building I suppose, but what fascinated me the most was a large sign that sat in front of it. The sign said ... in letters long faded by the sun ... *"This Project On Time."*

Sometimes the world looks to me like that unfinished wreck of a building project. It isn't hard to see that the world is far from ideal, and not nearly what God intended it to be... that there is still a lot of work to be done. I have always believed from the witness of scripture that God is busy working in history to bring creation to its goal ... to redeem the world by the Divine will through the efforts of God's people. But it's hard sometimes to see that God is doing anything ... that any building is happening at all. The biblical claim that God's creation project is right on time seems like that ironic and faded sign at that forlorn ruin. And I find myself asking the honest questions of earlier days which Israel and the church asked God centuries ago: "How long, O Lord?" (Psalm 89:46) and "Where is the promise of (Christ's) coming?" (2 Peter 3:4).

Karl Barth once said that pastors should preach "with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other." Surely we should pray that way as well. But the newspaper seems to contradict the testimony. The peace process in the Middle East stops and starts and stops again, always punctuated by violence against the innocent. Genocidal programs are always remembered rather than prevented ... and the Holocaust has been repeated on a smaller scale against the Armenians, the Cambodians, the Kurds, the Bosnians, the Tutsis and countless other peoples. It disturbs me most of all when the blood flows in the name of God ... Christians against Muslims, Protestants against Catholics, Muslims against Hindus, Muslims against Jews, Christians against Jews, Jews against Muslims. These evils are not God's fault ... they are human sins ... the inhumanity of person against person.

But God does not seem entirely innocent to me, either. Like most of you, I am horrified every time a tsunami, or a hurricane or an earthquake or tornado devastates and destroys countless lives. I just have to look at Haiti to wonder, "God, what is that about? Where are you? Why did you let this happen?" I hear about millions dying of AIDS in Africa, and I can hardly bear to listen. What in the world is God doing?

I remember a history professor in college who told me that he didn't see any purpose to history. He couldn't tell that it was headed any place in particular, and that was quite a shock to me. I had never even considered the possibility that the world might be going nowhere. Christopher

Lasch knocked another hole in my hope with his book, *The One and Only Heaven*, written to answer the question: "How does it happen that serious people continue to believe in progress in the face of massive evidence that refutes the idea of progress once and for all?"

Among other things, the Western religions are distinguished from the Eastern religions by their perspectives on time and destiny ... the Western religions believing in time as linear history ... as progress towards a Divine goal ... in Heaven ... as a final destination ... while the Eastern religions see time as cyclical ... history as endlessly repetitive ... and heaven as the one chance to escape the monotony of rebirth. Well, all that's fine for philosophy class, but meanwhile people are born and die and in between struggle and suffer terribly. If you read the papers or watch the news, you know it's much more than a philosophical question, because what is the point of all the pain if it isn't getting us anywhere?

For its part, the Bible has more than one view of history. The classical prophets tended to see history as the arena of God's activity ... war and weather were God's tools of judgment and purification. Redemption and renewal would come within history, and God would use events to bring progress towards the Divine ideal. Thus Haggai prophesied that God would help the people rebuild the Temple beyond its former magnificence, and you know what? They did, although it was destroyed soon after by yet another conquering imperial power. The apocalyptic authors, on the other hand ... burned by centuries of oppressive domination and violent conquest ... saw the world as progressively evil. History was the tool of Satan, and the only hope was God's ultimate intervention ... the end of time ... the final judgment ... the destruction of the world and evil with it. There are times when you run out of resources ... when you reach the end of your rope ... and you have no hope but God. It doesn't take much ... and it doesn't take long ... for most of us to reach that point. That's apocalyptic. The prophets urge you to make a difference ... while the apocalypics tell you that only God can make a difference. The prophets say, "God helps those who help themselves," while the apocalyptic says, "Let go and let God."

For the most part, the New Testament is apocalyptic in its view, and believes less in progress than in an abrupt end to all this nonsense. But both of these believe that history has a goal which is hopeful ... which belongs to God. Actually, we need both points of view to stay balanced ... for prophets work hard within history for social change but are usually frustrated by how slow the progress is ... while apocalypics tend to give up on change altogether and just wait for God to do something beyond history. Prophets tend to be over-responsible while apocalypics tend to be passive. But we can't afford to place all our hopes in human achievement ... nor to drop out and give up on establishing justice and equity and peace in our world, in our time.

For the next several weeks we will be hearing some apocalyptic texts encouraging us not to give up on God, no matter how bad things may seem. We will be hearing some of the poignant expectation of Jesus' imminent return to establish God's dominion once for all ... and some of the disappointment and readjustment of expectations when he did not return quickly as expected. For instance, in First Thessalonians the Apostle Paul told the church to get ready right now for Jesus' return:

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!

But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness.... For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing (1 Thes. 5:1-5, 9-11).

But some of the people apparently misunderstood what Paul was saying. They quit their jobs ... they freeloaded off friends and family, while criticizing them for not having enough faith to know the end of time was near. So Paul ... some say it was actually someone else writing a generation or so later ... wrote Second Thessalonians to say Jesus was going to return, but certain things had to happen first in God's economy of time, so they shouldn't panic or be pushed this way and that by doomsday demagogues:

As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here. Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction (2 Thes. 2:1-3).

Instead, he said, they should live holy and orderly lives, always prepared but still engaged in the world as a means of preparing the way for Christ's return:

So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.... Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right (2 Thes. 2:15-17, 3:13).

What does this say to us twenty sad centuries later? I don't pretend to have an answer for you today about the meaning of history or the precise contours of God's destiny for creation. But the scripture tells us what to do in the meantime. Trust in God anyway. In spite of the appearance of events ... in spite of the perennial bad news ... in spite of the contest in your own heart between good and evil ... between despair and hope ... trust in God. Remember that God endured the agony of an evil world in the cross of Christ and wrought resurrection out of it.

This supper we celebrate today reminds us of our destiny in Christ. Our destiny is life ... not life free from pain and struggle ... but life on the other side of it, guaranteed by God. That is the meaning of our baptism and the meaning of this sacred supper. What's more ... God is with us through it all ... and while we are all too aware of the suffering in our midst ... we also see signs of the resurrection, don't we? The harvest is continual ... death and rebirth happen frequently ... even in our own experience. And we must hold fiercely to such signs of hope. We are neither bright enough ... nor sophisticated enough ... to rely solely upon history, and we shouldn't be misled or panicked by those who want to claim they can. It is enough for us to trust in God and not grow weary in well doing ... because to the degree that we establish God's dominion of justice and peace in our hearts ... we create a sacred space where God can enter our world. Yet always we work with the knowledge that if the world is ever to become what God wants it to be, ultimately God will have to do it. And, ultimately, God will.

I saw a child's toy once while I was at Toys R Us back in the days when it would take our son about two hours of high anxiety decision making to choose which Ninja Turtle to buy. I guess he was about five or six at the time. I was looking at a code machine ... a picture which consisted of different colored line ... all jumbled up and squiggled on the page. Now, it's embarrassing when you are the parent with a college degree and you can't figure out one of those kid's toys where the box says "ages five to twelve." But I saw I would need about two weeks and a squad of Navaho code breakers to see the picture. My son sought me out to ask if I would "please, please, O please buy him a Ninja Turtle motorcycle." Seeing me fooling with the squiggly multicolored page and not wanting me to be distracted from the turtle quest at hand, he reached over, grabbed one of the colored plastic transparencies which accompanied it, and laid it on top of the page I was holding. And there it was: a picture of a lion, clear as day. Turned out, the key to the code was to look at the page through the right filter ... which would block out every unnecessary confusion so that the true picture could emerge.

Our testimony since the earliest days of the church is this ... Jesus Christ is the key to the meaning of history. He is the filter through which the truth emerges. *The truth* of what life means ... *the truth* of what God can do ... *the truth* of what God wants us to become. In Christ, God addresses ... and does not deny the evil and violence of the world. The cross prepares us for resurrection. God brings good even out of evil. God sews the tapestry of our lives with the bright and the dark threads. But we see through a glass darkly ... our heads are too small to contain the infinite God. So whether we ask the question in philosophical debate ... or because life has pushed us beyond our threshold for pain ... the answer is the same ... trust in God. This project is on time ... for time is in God's hands. So let us put ourselves in God's hands ... that our time might belong to the eternal purpose of one who wills us well and destines creation for the good. History is meaningless except for Christ ... but in Christ all things will work together for the good. That is the power of the resurrection. Can you see it? Do you get the picture?

Let us pray.

O God, Give us faith beyond sight. Where we cannot see your mercy and grace, make it visible through those around us. When we panic and despair, send us the peace of your presence. Lift up our hearts to hope again, to work for peace and justice and healing, to trust you beyond what we can do for ourselves. For our times are in your hands, we are in your hands, and we believe in you. Amen.