



Sermon for the Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 28  
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There was a barber that thought he should share his faith with his customers more than he had been doing lately. So the next morning when the sun came up and the barber got up out of bed he said, "Today I am going to witness to the first man that walks through my door."

Soon after he opened his shop the first man came in and said, "I want a shave!" The barber said, "Sure, just sit in the seat and I'll be with you in a moment." The barber went in the back and prayed a quick desperate prayer saying, "God, the first customer came in and I'm going to witness to him. So give me the wisdom to know just the right thing to say to him. Amen."

Then quickly the barber came out with his razor in one hand and a Bible in the other while saying "I just have one question for you: Are you ready to die?"

Jesus words in today's gospel seem to carry something of a similar question behind them. He's talking to his disciples about the end of the world as they know it – the destruction of Jerusalem and its beautiful Temple. As if that isn't frightening enough he then segues into a discussion of wars, famines, plagues, and the end of the world – but don't worry about all that, Jesus tells them, before all that happens you'll all be betrayed, arrested, and possibly put to death. Thanks, Jesus, we're feeling better already. You may very well think that passages such as this one are hard to read and to hear, but I can assure you they are even harder to preach. Yet here we are again, in these last few weeks before Advent, talking about the end of the world and getting ready to die, just as we do every year at this time.

We're all tempted to just set these parts of the Bible aside and not think too much about them. After all, haven't people been talking about the end of the world since the beginning of the world? Ancient history abounded with various theories about how everything would come crashing down one day – from a giant snake swallowing the whole creation to a world consuming fire that would take us all out. And, let's be hon-

est, everything that Jesus describes in this passage – from wars to famines to plagues and even to the persecution of Christians – has happened thousands of times in the centuries since he said these words, and is even continuing to happen right now in various parts of the world, and yet the end has not yet come, has it?

And yet, just when we might be tempted to not take such passages of scripture too seriously, we find ourselves praying the collect for this Sunday: “Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning [including, I might add, even the weird, disturbing bits.] Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ.” Well, dang-it all, it looks like we might have to wrestle with this part of the Bible after all. But perhaps – maybe – today’s collect gives us a helpful guide in how to read the disturbing and difficult parts of scripture. When I was in seminary, twenty-odd years ago, I had an Old Testament professor who used to say the Bible is like a plate of chicken wings. You have to learn to chew up the meat and spit out the bones. Perhaps our collect can show us where the meat and the bones are.

The natural temptation that we all face is the one the disciples face in this text. They ask Jesus, “when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” We all would like to know the future – when will the stock market crash again, when will another war break out, when will I get sick next, what will be the sign that end of the good times is coming and bad things are about to start happening?

Our prayer for this Sunday points us in another direction, however. It doesn’t say that we should go to the holy Scriptures looking for a road map of how the world will end or a set of predictions about what the future holds for us. Our prayer this Sunday is not that we will find in the holy Scriptures reasons to think that we are better or more loved by God than the rest of humanity and therefore will find a secret pathway to escape hard times when they come. We do not pray in this collect, “Lord, help us to learn the Scriptures so that we can be rich, or healthy, or never have to face suffering.” Instead, our collect today offers this reason for us to ask God to help us read, learn, and digest the holy Scriptures. That reason is so that we might “hold fast . . . the blessed hope of everlasting life” given to us in Christ.

Since this is our reason to read the Bible – and it is our reason to read the whole Bible, even the difficult passages like this one – then the most important part of today’s gospel reading comes right at the very end when Jesus offers the disciples this simple promise: “not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

He's just told them that some of them will die, so clearly his promise that not a hair of their heads will perish doesn't mean they won't die. It means that they will not perish eternally – they will gain their souls, he says, by enduring what is to come. We don't know what is to come, we don't know what we'll have to endure, and we don't know what lies between us and the end – whether we're talking about the end of this day, the end of our lives, or the end of the world. Like the disciples we want to know but Jesus only gives us the broad stroke picture, a very general outline, of what lies ahead.

We don't know what comes between us and the end but we do know this: the end of this will not be the end of all things, it will only be the end of this. The end of this day ushers in a new day. The end of this life ushers in a new life. The end of this world ushers in a new world. Jesus stands on the far bank, across the wide river of the struggles of this world, and beckons for us to keep moving forward towards him with patient endurance. Because by our endurance we will gain our souls. Amen.