

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost- November 14, 2010

Scripture lessons: Isaiah 65:17-25 & Luke 21:5-19

WHEN NO STONE IS LEFT UPON ANOTHER

What we believe about the future, what we believe about how things are going to turn out for us and the whole world has a lot to do with how we live now.

Arthur Miller's *The Death of a Salesman* is a classic of American literature. Its main character is Willie Loman, and he and his wife, Linda, have two sons, Happy and Biff. In one of the play's early scenes, the boys, who are now adults, have come home to Brooklyn. They're in their old bedroom reminiscing about the good times they'd had growing up together. But when their talk turns to the present and future, it's not so pleasant.

Happy, the younger one, has a job in business. He works hard to get ahead, just as his father has always done. Biff, for his part, had been a high school football star, but his time since has been restless and confused. For now he's chosen a countercultural life out west working on a ranch. He says to his brother, "I tell you, Hap, I don't know what the future is. I don't know what I'm supposed to want . . . To devote your whole life to keeping stock or making phone calls; to suffer fifty weeks a year for a two-week vacation and always to have to get ahead of the next fella. And still, that's how you build a future."

Happy replies, "All I can do now is to wait for the merchandise manager to die. And suppose I get to be merchandise manager? I don't know what the hell I'm working for. Sometimes I sit in my apartment all alone, and I think of the rent I'm paying, and it's crazy, and still, I'm lonely."

The play unfolds and the future feels ominous. Willie has always been intense about his dream of making it big, of having lots of money, security, popularity, and prestige. But none of that has happened yet, and it becomes clear that it won't.

Willie stays full of bluster, hype, and self-deception about this, but everyone else can see through it, including his wife and sons. Linda and Happy maintain some sympathy for him, but Biff wants his father to admit that he's a phony. The tension between those two builds.

Willie's future begins to sag to the point where he can't pay his bills anymore. He loses his job, his dignity, and his dream. He starts investing the hope that he has left in his funeral. He imagines all the people who'll come to it and relishes how impressed Biff will be when he sees so many out-of-towners there.

He says to his brother, Ben, "That funeral will be massive. They'll come from Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, (and) New Hampshire. And all the old-timers with the strange license plates. That boy (Biff) will be thunderstruck, Ben, because he never realized. I'm known . . ."

But when Willie dies, the only people that come to his funeral are his family.

Classics become classic for good reason. They help us to focus and work on the biggest and most important questions. *The Death of a Salesman* leads us to ask, "What dream do I have for my future? What am I counting on to make my life worthwhile? How will things turn out for me?"

T.S. Eliot's poem, *East Coker*, is another classic. It begins with this line: "In my beginning is my end." It goes on to ponder various rhythms and seasons of life, both of ours and in nature. It lifts up the depth and beauty of many of these, but always with clear awareness of the truth it had announced in its opening line: "In my beginning is my end." All of us born into this world will die. What difference does that make to the way we live now?

It tempts Macbeth to despair. He's afraid that death is THE end and fears that it makes this life meaningless. In his famous speech in Act V, Scene 5, of Shakespeare's classic play, he says,

"To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools

The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale,
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing."

These big questions about the future and its meaning for our life now have always been central to the Christian faith. The branch of our theological tradition that deals with these is called "eschatology"- the study of "the last things" or "the end times". Where is this great mystery of life and of ours in it finally headed? Is it for a glorious consummation, a violent, all-destructive conflagration, an endless cycle of meaningless repetition, or a tired and whimpered petering out? Within the bigger picture of all things, what will *my* fate be? What difference does any of it make to the way I live now? Those are the kinds of questions "eschatology" tries to answer.

When we're younger questions like these probably don't cross our minds much. If they do, we likely brush them off because we simply have so many places to go, people to meet, and other things to do. Right *now* is just so absorbing that we don't want to think much about where it's all headed.

Christian writer Lewis Smedes, for example, tells about how he was raised in a church that emphasized Jesus' imminent return to bring about the end of the world. People talked about this as if it was something they eagerly awaited and wanted. But young Lewis wasn't so sure. He prayed to Jesus to hold off on the Second Coming until after the Detroit Tigers won the World Series again. I wonder now if the world might already have ended, if not for the many Cub fans among us who've been praying that same prayer for years.

In any case, we can't finally escape or laugh off the eschatological questions. All of us unavoidably are living into a future about which we inevitably have expectations and attitudes. What should they be?

As Christians, we look to our ultimate classic, the Bible, for guidance. Both Scripture readings for today are pertinent to it as examples of Biblical eschatology. The first, from the prophet Isaiah, is addressed originally to people who had lived for a generation in another country as exiles. The people who first heard this poem actually had been born in Babylon.

They had never seen Jerusalem before, but had *heard* of how magnificent it was supposed to be. But now they have seen it for themselves and it's nothing like what they'd been told. The temple has been destroyed, desecrated, and burned. The wind whistles through dreary, dusty, and empty streets.

But God says through Isaiah: ". . . I am about to create a new heaven and a new earth . . . I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it. No more shall there be an infant that lives a few days or an old person who does not live out a lifetime. They shall build houses and inhabit them. They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit."

These words of great hope are announced to people living in awful circumstances.

And yet, five centuries later Jesus predicts that Jerusalem will be destroyed *again*, including the temple that has been re-built. In today's second Scripture reading from Luke, Jesus visits this temple with his disciples and tells them, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another" (21:6).

The people who first read this in Luke's gospel knew that Jesus' prediction already had come true. In 70 A.D., a few years before Luke was written, the Romans had responded to persistent rebellion among their Jewish subjects by laying siege to Jerusalem. They had dispersed its inhabitants and crushed the temple. Christians were among those hunted down, arrested, tortured, and executed. Luke reports that Jesus had told his followers, "You will be hated because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

The Bible's eschatological teaching is unflinchingly realistic *and* irrepressibly hopeful. It says that the future *will* bring times of widespread disaster and calamity. It affirms that the future will bring suffering, pain, and death to each of us as individuals. It proclaims that there will be times both in our larger world and our personal lives when "not one stone will be left upon another. At the same time the Bible insists that none of this is ever cause for despair. None of it, the Scriptures say, makes our lives here

meaningless, because God is still God and God is still almighty love. God is still determined to have all things become as God means for them to be, creating a new heaven and a new earth of all-encompassing love, joy, and peace.

In the midst of calamity, disaster, suffering and death that *will* come our way, the Scriptures are clear that our task is to stay focused on God's future and to shape our present lives according to it. God's new heaven and earth, *not* money or comfort, is the dream for our life. God's new heaven and earth, *not* popularity or prestige, is what we count on to make our lives worth living. By enduring in our commitment to live now as fully as we can in the love, joy, and peace of God's new heaven and earth, we, as Jesus said, gain our souls.

To that, as faithful people we say, "Amen, Lord and hallelujah!" BUT- it's so much easier to say than to do. For example, there's probably never been anything more challenging to our hope in and commitment to the Bible's eschatological vision than the Holocaust of World War II. No one has struggled with this fact more honestly and publicly than the great Jewish writer, Elie Wiesel. As a boy, Wiesel was imprisoned at Auschwitz, survived its horrors, yet witnessed the cruel deaths of his family and friends there. Ever since, in his adult life, he's passionately expressed in his many novels, books, and essays his fierce complaints against God's alleged goodness, his severe doubts about God's promises for the future and his seething anger at his people for continuing to believe in God.

Nevertheless, some fifty years after his liberation from Auschwitz, Wiesel wrote this prayer for Rosh Hashanah: "Master of the Universe, let us make up. It is time. How long can we go on being angry? More than fifty years have passed since the nightmare was lifted. Many good things and less good have happened to those who survived it. They learned to build on ruins. Family life was re-created. Children were born, friendships struck. They learned to have faith in their surroundings, even in their fellow men and women. Gratitude has replaced bitterness in their hearts."

Even in the death camps, even in those who've survived them, prayers have been said, hymns have been sung, and faith in God has been affirmed. Even there, in the darkest valleys of death's shadow, hope in God's future has surged.

In the first line of *East Coker*, T.S. Eliot wrote, "In my beginning is my end." To all of us born into this world, suffering, pain, and death *will* come. He's right about that. But in his poem's last verse, he also says that we need to "be still and still moving, Into a further union, a deeper communion." He's right about that, too, and his poem's final words say why: "In my end is my *beginning*."

The death that comes to all of us in the end is *not* THE end. The coming of God's new heaven and earth opens up beyond it. New beginning is given to us by God's unconquerable grace, bringing the further union and deeper communion that we gratefully expect and prepare for now. In practicing God's all-embracing love, joy, and peace we get ready day-by-day for our ultimate future. In doing that, we, as Jesus said, gain our souls. Amen.

Kurt Kirchoff

PASTORAL PRAYER

Our great Lord and God, we come to You again grateful for this gift of life. We know that it's fragile. We know that for each of us and for our whole world the time will come when no stone is left upon another,

But our faith is in You. You are God, You are almighty love, and You have promised Your new heaven and earth of eternal love, joy, and peace. We know that our true security is in You. You are the One to whom we can always turn in every time of struggle, grief, darkness and loss.

Help us to gain our souls. Inspire us as Your people to move into ever deeper communion with You. Strengthen us to endure now in living as fully as we can in the love, joy, and peace of Your new creation, expecting and getting ready for our final future with You. We pray this again in Jesus' name and we pray as he has taught us, saying together, "Our Father, . . . Amen.