

**Sermon for Morning Prayer:
The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany**

The Reverend Warren E. Shaw, Priest in Charge

The Lessons:ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the sixty-sixth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.ⁱⁱ

“Thus saith [SETH] the LORD, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me? and where is the place of my rest? For all those things hath mine hand made, and all those things have been, saith [SETH] the LORD: but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.

“... Rejoice ye with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all ye that love her: rejoice for joy with her, all ye that mourn for her: ... For thus saith [SETH][the LORD, Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the Gentiles like a flowing stream: then shall ye suck, ye shall be borne upon her sides, and be dandled upon her knees. As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you; and ye shall be comforted in Jerusalem. And when ye see this, your heart shall rejoice, and your bones shall flourish like an herb: and the hand of the LORD shall be known toward his servants, and his indignation toward his enemies. For, behold, the LORD will come with fire, and with his chariots like a whirlwind, to render his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire and by his sword will the LORD plead with all flesh: and the slain of the LORD shall be many.... For I know their works and their thoughts: it shall come, that I will gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come, and see my glory. And I will set a sign among them, and I will send those that escape of them unto the nations, to Tarshish [TARR-shish], Pul [POOL], and Lud [LUDD], that draw the bow, to Tubal [TWO-ball], and Javan [DGĀH-vann], to the isles afar off, that have not heard my fame, neither have seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the Gentiles. And they shall bring all your brethren for an offering unto the LORD out of all nations upon horses, and in chariots, and in litters, and upon mules, and upon swift beasts, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, saith [SETH] the LORD, as

the children of Israel bring an offering in a clean vessel into the house of the LORD. And I will also take of them for priests and for Levites, saith [SETH] the LORD. For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, saith [SETH] the LORD, so shall your seed and your name remain. And it shall come to pass, that from one new moon to another, and from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith [SETH] the LORD.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the first Chapter of the Second Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth; So that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure: Which is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God, that ye may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which ye also suffer: Seeing it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you; And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power; When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day. Wherefore also we pray always for you, that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfil all the good pleasure of his goodness, and the work of faith with power: That the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and ye in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “For the LORD will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to pay back his anger in fury, and his rebuke in flames of fire.”^{iv} In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

These ominous words from Isaiah follow some very soothing words about the future. The prophet depicts God as a mother comforting her children, holding them and drying their tears. He predicts times of great prosperity ahead. And then he launches into this prediction of an apocalypse. So one is left to wonder. Which is it? What kind of God do we have? There seems to some incongruity here.

There are those who say that these apparently conflicting statements were made at different times, perhaps even by different people, and were simply placed together by whoever wrote them down.

Others say that the words of comfort apply to Israel and the words of judgment apply to Israel’s enemies.

To my mind, there is something here that is more profound than either of those explanations. The fact is, I believe, that prosperity and judgment are not really incompatible because a time of judgement is a time of transition. Every end is also a beginning and every beginning is also an end.

A man and a woman leave their parents to start a new family. A child leaves the security of the womb in order to be born. St. Paul says, “When I became a man I put away childish things.” People grow up and pass through many changes in their lives, and some of the changes are accompanied by fear, remorse, and tears. But “What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.” The old must go away in order for the new to emerge.

Changes are often gradual, but some changes are sudden and dramatic, like the arrival of a Viking ship at the mouth of an English

river, or the collapse of the World Trade Center. The Bible often depicts such events with dramatic images.

The Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus are world-changing events, and Jesus Himself uses fearsome apocalyptic language to describe those changes. He predicts sudden and terrible disasters, calamities that will put an end to life as it has been known up until that time. And then He says, “When these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

In St. Matthew’s Gospel, the death of Jesus is accompanied by an earthquake and a three hour total eclipse. Tombs are split open and the bodies of many saints appear in Jerusalem as a precursor of the Resurrection. The veil in the temple is torn asunder, and a few years later the Romans tore down and burned the whole building. Those calamitous events marked the end of the Jewish priesthood, the sacrificial system, the Sanhedrin, and the whole hierarchical structure of Jewish society. By that time, however, the Christian Church had already begun to develop a new structure that eventually held all of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East together for centuries. That is the nature of apocalypse. Every end is also a beginning, and every beginning is also an end.

Christ died a horrible death as the perfect representative of the old order of things, and rose from the dead as the perfect representative of the new order of creation. He could not have risen if He had not died, and so St. John speaks of the death of Jesus as His going to glory. The events of Good Friday and Easter belong together and constitute the fundamental pattern, the archetype, of apocalypse and salvation.

The events of Pentecost constitute an apocalyptic event in which the prophecy of Isaiah is strikingly fulfilled. “For the LORD will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind.”

I’m told that the sound of a tornado is like the sound of a freight train as it approaches. I have also seen the destruction left in the path of a hurricane. That is how St. Luke describes the coming of the Holy Spirit. “There came the sound of a mighty rushing wind.” Remember that when we sing “Breath on me breath of God.”

The flame which rested on the heads of the apostles on the day of Pentecost was no benign little flicker from a birthday candle. Walls came down that day. Men of different languages and cultures were welded together on that day. Simple fishermen became powerful preachers. Social outcasts were put into positions of leadership in the emerging new community of faith.

In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul talks about the conflict in the church of his day between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. He says that such conflicts belong to an old order, which he says has been brought to an end by the Cross of Christ.

We are living today in a time of tumultuous changes in the world. The chain of command no longer controls the flow of information. Ideas and information flow horizontally through networks, and, as they do, the power that goes with them devolves and is dispersed. The pronouncements of popes and bishops and commissions and assemblies and presidents are ignored. Political parties no longer control their members or speak with one voice or deliver large blocs of votes. The global economy tramples down national boundaries as the global village emerges. The center of Christianity has moved from Europe to Africa. The institution of marriage, which once provided stability to families, has been deconstructed and redefined throughout the West. These changes have been swift and dramatic with consequences yet to be fully realized.

Some of you may be experiencing times of sudden change in your own lives. Maybe there is something good, like a graduation or a marriage or a new baby. Maybe there is something bad, like a health issue or a job loss or a death in the family. For you, those are world-changing events. The old reality, good or bad, has given way to a new reality. It is important in such times to remember that every end is also a beginning and every beginning is also an end.

Apocalyptic imagery is frightening because rapid change is often accompanied by fear. “The LORD will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind.” But apocalyptic times must be met by faith and seen in the context of God’s love.

St. Paul says in Romans, “You have not been given the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry Abba! Father! It is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are the children of God and ... fellow heirs with Christ, if so be that we suffer with him in order to be glorified with him.”

The Crucifixion and the Resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Ghost are dramatic and fearsome events. Together they constitute the heart of the gospel. “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.” This is the faith that overcomes fear.

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ⁱ *THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xiv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱ *Isaiah 66:1-2, 10, 12-16, 18-23 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *II Thessalonians 1-end (KJV).*

^{iv} *Isaiah 66:15 (RSV).*