

Text: Zechariah 14:4-9, I Thessalonians 3:9-13, John 18:33-37

I don't remember their names- but when I was a boy- probably in 2nd grade or so- some family we knew- had a bomb shelter. Yep- an underground bunker sort of thing with supplies. This was in the early sixties... so in retrospect you can understand what they might have been thinking- even if it's not a train of thought you want to follow. It's the same time when they were giving out dog-tags to us at school- we thought it was sort of cool- a handy addition to the paraphernalia for playing war in the woods in back of the house. Later, I was stunned to realize they were intended as identification of the remains after - of course- the bomb hit.

For all the hope of new technology and despite the brilliance of mass produced post-war prosperity- the sixties had an odd apocalyptic tinge to them- as we suddenly realized we could destroy ourselves. But then, so does almost every age- the turn of the millennium- the end of the world in the year 1000, the end of computer driven life in the year 2000- the end of an ancient calendar in 2012- atomic bombs- international terrorism... the economy- the threats range from possible, to reality- to imaginary. But there are always threats hanging over us.

We played with those tokens of possible destruction- and so laughed at the fears that built bomb shelters and ordered dog tags. That made it very hard for me to imagine what my parents thought when those dog tags arrived- or as they watched me playing in that bomb shelter... could they imagine that either would actually be used? I am old enough now- or my children are - that I have had fears- they think foolish- and may well be.

In this gospel- Jesus sounds like the older, cautious type- he recognizes the political instability that Jerusalem faces- and looks at creation that is itself- unstable. Hurricanes and earth quakes- famines and tsunamis - his words might point to the end of days- or to the day's news some weeks. What are Christians to do in the face of fear- of fear of destruction because of war- of fear in the face of natural disaster- in the face of fear when the economy collapses?

What am I to do when my little life- the people I know and the work I do- the neighborhood I live in- when my life as I know it is under threat- it happens you know. A bad diagnosis, a damaged relationship, the loss of a job, a bad grade on the entrance exam- it happens. There will be signs- people will faint from fear.

Jesus sounds wiser than his thirty-three years here- and it seems he is about to suggest building a bomb shelter- or at least a community purged of the stained and sinful- a shelter of the upright and the blameless- It sounds like he is about to give us the secret code by which we escape- or the alternate focus that will make it not matter what suffering is going on in and around us.

Too much religion takes on this response to the real and imagined threats we face. There is real danger in this world- God gave free will to each human- and the astounding power of life to change and develop, our ability to grow ad mature- means that things are unstable- and what comes to joyful birth and grows in strength- will decline, weaken and die. And so the impulse is to blame someone - or some aspect of life- to wall out the unclean and the guilty, or to disdain and discount this fleeting, passing world. The end of days and the weight of judgment - the promise becomes an excuse for violence and the

all too human response of fear- becomes the means to manipulate and control. Blame someone or claim some unrealistic responsibility- withdraw or attack- real fears or imagined fears bring about something destructive and deadly before anything actually happens. But Jesus does not leave us ground plans for bomb shelters or suggest identification tags that will survive what might kill us.

Paul's words are remarkably calm in the midst of the other two lessons- With mountains being split in two, and people fleeing as from an earthquake- and with signs in the heavens and distress among peoples- Paul is focused on the small, gentle interactions among us- I thank God for you- I long to be with you and- in our conversation- to strengthen your faith. He wants the people in the Church at Thessalonica- and us- to abound in love for one another- he leads us back to the summary of the law- and he wants us strengthened in holiness- in lives that reflect God's purposes and that are grounded in him. For a church barely on its feet and yet facing persecution- that was enough. It might be closer to enough for us than we think.

What calm will you find in the midst of the worlds' endings? Where will your heart find stability when things are shifting faster than you can follow- when destruction erupts and things fall apart? The economy is troubling- the church is caught in endless fights - the threat of climate change- the argument that keeps repeating itself in your household, the list of tasks that you could not finish in a ten day week- the fear of being alone - the burden of responsibility for others- maybe it is time to head for the metaphorical bomb shelters and to clasp whatever little pieces might preserve my identity.

Jesus leads us out of the bomb shelter and into the streets. He looks as clearly- far more clearly actually- than I do at the chaos

and the wrong, the limitations and the uncertainty of life. He speaks in the shadow of the cross and just before that supper that will end with him giving himself to his friends and for the life of the world. He knows far better than any huckster selling an end times novel or a fear driven life- Jesus knows the weight of human sin and the frailty of a human body. His line of sight sees past ours and encompasses the end- He sees all this and gives us an honest account- and then he says:

Lift up your head- when you see these things you know that the kingdom of God is near.

In the end- what he is saying is this- wherever you stand- no matter what terror would paralyze you or what fears drive you to frantic action- stop. It doesn't matter what year the calendar says it is- or what the circumstances- the kingdom of God is at hand- around the corner, in the next moment- when you breathe in the next breathe.

There are reasonable precautions to take. If not bomb shelters- its worth having a first aid kit and some bottled water and canned goods around. Keep some money in savings if you can and always have a few dollars tucked into an odd corner of the bill fold- so you have an emergency reserve. Pay attention to issues like global warming and take your role as a citizen seriously. Plan for the future- and set affairs in order- But don't do any of it with a fatalistic sense that it will all end in flames or it will all crumble to dust- or with some feverish idea that if you miscalculate you will be lost. In the worst of it- look for God- in fear and foreboding- sing a hymn of hope and of confidence, even a carol if that's the one you know the words for.

Jesus looks into our face, contorted by fear and marked by guilt- and tells us to lift our heads to God's kingdom; the perfection of

creation and the fulfillment of your life- is just about to break out. Thank God- as Paul does for friends, companions and teachers. Find a way to act and to speak- so that others find their faith strengthened and their hope secured. Find ways to act on the two great commandments- to Love God and to love your neighbor.

The story resolves in Zechariah's vision when night and day- summer and winter- and all the opposing forces are brought into one beautiful and fruitful harmony. Jesus' story resolves itself in hope being fulfilled. I don't know what it will look like for God to bring this creation through its final transformation into a new creation- I do not know what eternal life- or the resurrection of the body will look like- but I do know that if this body is destroyed, when this body is destroyed- God will not need a piece of metal with my statistics- God knows us by name and as brothers and sisters to Christ- we are held in God's heart. God's hand and heart will hold the essence of each of us that survives- and God will find whatever is needed for the body that will be- The one who said- "Let there be light..." will bring light out of whatever night ends this day.

Pull your head out of the denial that ignores human suffering and the world's upheaval-but not to bury it into some flimsy bomb shelter- your identity rests in God's love for you and the call God issues you to live and to serve- Stand up- if it's the last thing you'll do and look for the smallest sign-of the greatest thing- in the midst of what is passing away- look for the one thing that will endure- Stand up and raise your heads, the kingdom of God is near.

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