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Focus on the present

by Roger Karban

Scripture for Life

Christians always find it difficult to live their lives of faith in the present, not in the past or the future.

It's easy to reflect on being one of God's followers in the good old days, now that situations and people's response to them have become black and white. What we were then to say and do is now perfectly clear. Or to push everything into a future world in which God will have changed things enough to make our choices easy, a world in which this world's "ifs" will be turned into certainties.



Thirty-Third Sunday in
Ordinary Time

Today's first and third readings especially address the future side of that temptation. But we must be careful not to look at today's Gospel through the lens of our Malachi passage. Though both Luke and the prophet talk about future destruction, each is motivated by a different theology, a different way of explaining the causes behind that destruction. And as we'll see, Luke especially keeps pulling us back to the present.

Active sometime in the late sixth century B.C., Malachi zeroes in on Yahweh's punishments and rewards. At this point we're still 500 years away from a biblical concept of an afterlife as we know it. Nothing lies beyond this world except an amorphous place called Sheol in which good and bad alike exist in some sort of suspended animation.

This seems to be why Malachi is convinced the future will include appropriate punishments and rewards. The irony of the prophet's oracle revolves around his belief that the fire which Yahweh will use to turn "all the proud and all evildoers [into] stubble" will be the same fire that will arise as the "sun of justice with its healing rays" for those who "fear Yahweh's name." There are different effects for different people from the same action. But it's important to note Yahweh is directly involved in both the reward and the punishment.

Luke writes probably 15 years after the 70 A.D. destruction of Jerusalem. Many Christians had by then interpreted that disaster as a punishment for the city's rejection of Jesus. But the evangelist never says God personally punished those evildoers for that specific misdeed. Luke is convinced Jerusalem's destruction was somehow hooked up with Jesus' death, not because God directly reached down from heaven and vengefully devastated the city, but because they rejected Jesus' message of nonviolence, the city's inhabitants created their own fate.

But, counter to general Christian expectation, Rome's destruction of Jerusalem didn't usher in Jesus' second coming. Luke reminds his community that that event is still in the distant, undetermined future. Lots of "stuff" -- events beyond everyone's control -- still has to come down the pike before the Parousia.

The only thing Luke's church can control is the here and now. Though his community seems to be enduring some sort of persecution, the evangelist sees this opposition as a unique opportunity to "give testimony": to share with non-Christians some of the reasons they've chosen to spend their lives imitating Jesus' death and resurrection. Though Luke's optimism about surviving persecution hasn't always panned out, his insistence on "hanging in there" in spite of opposition and Jesus' delayed Parousia is probably the best advice an inspired author could give. Our lives of faith are only secured by our determination to keep living them day by day to the hilt, no matter the consequences.

The unknown author of 2 Thessalonians can never be accused of concentrating only on the past or the future. Though many in the community spend their days looking for Jesus' return, this particular church seems rife with freeloaders and busybodies. Speaking in Paul's name, the author reminds his readers, "If anyone is unwilling to work, neither should that one eat." And no one should go around "minding the business of others." The writer is convinced that we're only going to be judged on how we live the present.

In reference to the apocalyptic aspects of today's first and third readings, the late Carroll Stuhlmueller often remarked, "When prophecy dies out, apocalyptic comes in." We're simply more comfortable zeroing in on some future divine reward and punishment than we are in confronting present-day problems in the community.

Before the early 1960s, I heard lots of apocalyptic sermons: warnings about God's future destruction of our planet. Immodest fashions, communism, Protestants and dirty movies were the usual culprits. But once Vatican II began, most of those sermons disappeared. Prophecy again came into Catholicism. Our bishops helped us focus on the present and the reforms necessary to make our church the community Jesus envisioned. No longer did we expect God to dramatically step in and change our world. A better future became our responsibility.

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