

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
November 17, 2013
Luke 21:5-19

Dear God, sometimes the future seems so uncertain, so frightening-for the world and for ourselves-that we look for a safe place to hide. Find us in those places, O God, and help us to see the whole picture of your sovereign will at work. Give us faith to trust and to invest our lives in the work you have for us to do. Startle us with your truth and open our minds and our hearts to your word of love and hope in Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Read the Signs”

Cathy Chang is an artist who creates interactive art installations in public spaces. Her art has been described as “ingenious, simple, and inspiring” and often makes use of the abandoned buildings of her home city, New Orleans.

She is best known for her “Before I Die” project, which you see on the cover of your bulletin. The project was inspired by the sudden death of a very close friend of hers in 2009. Cathy said she thought about death a lot after her friend died. She also said her friend’s death brought her deep gratitude for the time they shared together, and clarity to the things that are most meaningful to her. But she struggled to maintain that clarity and perspective in her day to day life.

So she turned to her friends for help, and with them painted the side of an abandoned building with chalkboard paint and stenciling that read “Before I die I want to _____.” Anyone walking by could pick up a piece of chalk, reflect on their lives, and share their personal aspirations in a public space.

It was all an experiment without expectations. But by the second day, the wall was completely filled out and it kept growing. People wrote things like: Before I die I want to...

- sing for millions,
- hold her one more time,
- straddle the International Date Line,
- see my daughter graduate,
- eat more everything,
- abandon all insecurities,
- plant a tree,
- follow my childhood dream,
- be completely myself...

People’s responses made Cathy laugh out loud, tear up, and consoled her during her toughest times.

The "Before I Die" project has now spread to other cities and countries as far flung as Birmingham, AL to Johannesburg, South Africa. Four hundred walls have been erected in over 60 countries and 25 languages.

The walls, in a very simple way, get at a very powerful and deep question:

"Is there any hope-for the world and for me?"

Someone once wrote that, "How you view the future, the world's and your own personal destiny, has a lot to do with how you live your life." Do you view the future with hope, and live your life accordingly, or do you view it dimly, and live it accordingly? What do you want to do before you die?

Philosophers and poets have always paid a lot of attention to this topic and so has religion. There is a word for it. It is called, "eschatology," the study of last things, the end times, the summation of the whole enchilada.

We hear a lot about the end times in the stories we heard a few minutes ago. They are examples of Biblical eschatology, the end of times.

The story we heard from Isaiah was addressed to a community of people who had lived as captives in another country for a few generations. They had never seen Jerusalem. All they knew was what they heard about Mt. Zion, the stunning temple, the marble and gold, the shops, the streets, the houses-and everything they heard about Jerusalem made it sound glamorous and beautiful. Now they had returned, and it was nothing like what they had been told. It was all rubble. The shops were all gone, empty for decades. The houses were gone, too. And the temple was leveled, burned to the ground, utterly destroyed. The future looked very grim for the returning captives.

In the Luke story, written five centuries after Isaiah, Jesus predicts the destruction of Jerusalem will happen again, including the prediction that the temple would be destroyed again (because by Jesus' time it had been lovingly rebuilt). The people who read Luke's words, like the people who read Isaiah's words, were living in the midst of tragedy and devastation. Wars, uprisings, and persecutions awaited the people. Christians were arrested, turned in by family and friends, and sent to jail. The future was grim.

Facing persecution and arrest, like Luke's readers did, or coming home to a city in ruins, like the Israelites did, are, for the most part, unimaginable to us.

I don't know about you, but when I see the pictures of the devastation caused by the typhoon in the Philippines, it's hard for me to wrap my head around that. Such devastation is, by and large, foreign to us. A future that bleak is hard to fathom.

But that's the picture Luke and Isaiah are painting for us. That's what it looked like for the people hearing these stories for the first time.

Yet curiously, Luke tells his listeners that the bad times will give them an opportunity to testify. And Isaiah tells his readers that God is creating a new heaven and a new earth. You see, in the Bible, in all these stories about the end times, what we read as chaos, God interprets as opportunity. What we read as destruction, God interprets as building something new; what we read as devastation, God interprets as hope.

We see something that is dying. We see the old way of doing things and living as dying; but to God, things aren't dying, new things are being born. New ways of living and working and being as individuals or as a country are being born.

This why any talk of eschatology is hopeful; the future is always hopeful, because God is in it. Now, don't get me wrong. Christian hope isn't simple-minded "pie in the sky thinking". Nor is it nihilistic despair about tomorrow. Christian hope, eschatology, is born out of the conviction that, whatever the future holds, God is in it and therefore, it is good.

But I wouldn't be honest with you if I didn't tell you that sometimes the preacher has a hard time believing what she preaches.

At yesterday's presbytery meeting, two churches (at their request) that can no longer afford to stay open were assimilated into two larger, neighboring churches. Northminster, in North County, and Tyler Place, in the Tower Grove neighborhood, for all intents and purposes, closed. We've closed at least 20 churches since I've been here, and more will come. It's a difficult and emotional process, to say the least. And it's really hard to find any hope in that process.

We also loaned 1.3 million dollars to a church that can't pay its monthly mortgage because they took out a loan too large to handle. I was opposed to that action, because I don't think the presbytery can afford to do that, and I have serious questions as to whether the church is worth the investment given their demographics.

I left the meeting yesterday with very little hope. I think we made some bad decisions. But our Christian faith tells us to look to the future with hope, not to look back and live as if our best days are behind us. We can't live like that.

Someone once said, "We cannot let the history rooms each one of us carry inside crowd out our future room. We cannot dwell in our history room, living life as if our best days are behind us." We have to live life looking to the future with hope. That is eschatology.

If someone were to hand you a piece of chalk, and ask you to write on the wall of an abandoned building what you want to do before you die, what would you write? Would it be something hopeful, or pessimistic? What would it say about your future?

Karl Barth wrote, "Hope takes place in the act of taking the next step."

William Sloane Coffin wrote, “Hope has nothing to do with optimism. Its opposite is not pessimism but despair. And if Jesus never allowed his soul to be cornered into despair, clearly we Christians shouldn’t either.” (Credo, page 19)

Remember what that person said, that: “what you believe about the future, what you **believe** about how things are going to turn out for the world and for yourself, has a great deal to do with how you live your life in the present.” (*John Buchanan, “In the End, Our Beginning”*)

I want to close with a story about a young high school student whose father was a horse trainer. Because the family had to follow the horse-racing season, the young boy had to change schools throughout the year. During his senior year he was asked to write a paper about what his dreams for the future were. His paper described owning a 200-acre horse ranch with stables and tracks, and a 4,000 square foot home. He even drew a diagram of the property and the design of his house. He turned the paper in and two days later it came back with an “F” on the front and a note to see the teacher. After class, the teacher explained to the boy that his dream was unrealistic. The teacher said that if the boy rewrote the paper with a much more realistic dream, he would reconsider the grade.

The boy went home and asked his father what to do.

“It’s your decision,” said the father. Dad knew this was a very important decision.

The boy kept the paper for a week and then returned it to his teacher after class. “Here,” the boy said. “You can keep the ‘F’ and I’ll keep my dream.”

“What you believe about the future, what you **believe** about how things are going to turn out for the world and for yourself, has a great deal to do with how you live your life in the present.”

Amen.

Sources:

“In the End, Our Beginning”, John Buchanan, Fourth Presbyterian Church, November 15, 1998

www.workingpreacher.org

Cathy Change, TED Talk, www.beforeidie.cc

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⁵When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, ⁶"As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

⁷They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" ⁸And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them.

⁹"When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." ¹⁰Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; ¹¹there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

¹²"But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. ¹³This will give you an opportunity to testify. ¹⁴So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; ¹⁵for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. ¹⁶You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. ¹⁷You will be hated by all because of my name. ¹⁸But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹By your endurance you will gain your souls.