

SPG#189, Advent 2B

December 7, 2008

Isaiah 40:1-11

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

The epistle reading today from 2 Peter records a sermon presumably delivered by the Apostle Peter himself. In his words Peter speaks of the coming of the "day of the Lord," when the elements of the earth will be melted by fire. But he also talks about God being patient with humans. And he talks about how we should be living as we anticipate the "day of the Lord."

I must confess to you that over the years this sermon of Peter's has given me great difficulty. And there have been some times in the past when I thought I had done the best I could and still just did not get it with this sermon. But in these days I think I have come to a couple of things that have allowed me to appreciate his words more than ever before. First, we must have some sense of the times in which Peter lived. And second we must have a sense of what Peter was trying to do in this sermon., what he was trying to accomplish.

In the first place he is trying to provide a characterization of God in words. And so he says at the first, **With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.** So that is his characterization of God in words.

Secondly, Peter lived in the first century when all in the churches looked for the coming of Jesus Christ in the short term. So one thing Peter is trying to do in today's reading is to paint a picture of that coming of "the Lord," as he says. He is trying to provide images that the people might use in their own characterizations.

But thirdly, and this is the tricky part, he is trying to establish a connection between God and the people in human terms so that God is not some distant, magical, spiritual force, but One who can be known.

And finally, with all of this considered, who God is, the fact that he can be known, and that he is coming at "the day of the Lord," he wants to give the people some ideas on how they can best be living.

Peter's remarks appear as a series of contrasting statements, one after the other, statements about God, about God's coming, statements about knowing God, and statements about how we should live. And there are no transitional statements between the contrasting statements. For example, if I was going to talk about four different things in a sermon, I would say something like, "Now that I have discussed God, I am going to say a few things about knowing God." And that would be a transitional statement that would move us from one subject to another. But Peter does not do that. He goes from one to the other with no transitions. That says to me that he assumed that the people were so tuned in to what he was saying that they would not need transitional statements.

But for us in the 21st century, it is easy for us to be overcome with the immensity of what Peter is talking about. And so if it appears disconnected as well as immense the temptation is to give up. And if we give up, we miss the gift that he is trying to deliver to us in his words. I think it is upon any reader of these words to organize these contrasting statements so that they have personal meaning for the individual. And that is what I have tried to do today.

And as I have said before, one sermon will in no way take the place of your own reading and wrestling with these words.

To begin with, Peter is speaking of the nature of God. And he says that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. So, right off the bat Peter speaks of the timelessness of God, speaks of the eternal nature of God.

And so in the back of any reader's mind is the concern about how any human could know a spiritual being with whom a thousand years is like one day and one day like a thousand years. In anticipation of that concern, Peter, in the next verse, speaks of the human qualities of God. He says God is patient with us, and is not slow with his promises to us, and that he does not want anyone to perish. And so implicit in these words is that God can be known and related to. God is one who is patient and loving with us. These first two contrasting statements have to do with God, to whom a thousand years is like one day, and one day a thousand years. These statements have to do with this same God being known by us.

Having established his first major point that God is God and that God can be known, Peter next moves to a second major point. He speaks of the day of the Lord coming suddenly, and he speaks of the heavens passing away and the elements of the earth dissolving in fire. A quick reading of these words leads one to think of massive annihilation with everything and everyone passing away in the fire of God. But a more careful reading reveals more. Reading in between the lines we can see that this fire Peter speaks of is not the undoing of all that God has created.

It is not a total purging of all creation. Rather it seems to be a selective fire where certain things are burned and changed and certain things are left. Because Peter says in today's reading that out of this fire will come a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness is at home. Peter's picture of the day of the Lord is a captivating one, and perhaps a frightening one. But he is using graphic images for a purpose. What purpose. We will get to it.

One thing that is for sure in the reading is that righteousness prevails. Integrity survives the fire or the change. Because Peter indicates that whatever is corrupt, whatever is false will not survive the change. Further Peter says in so many words that the righteous anticipate and hope for this fire, this radical change. But those who are not righteous have reason to dread it.

And so to review our contrasting statements so far: God is God. God can be known. And thirdly Peter speaks of "the day of the Lord" when that which is not holy and godly and righteous will be destroyed. Following this, Peter turns to his listeners and readers in the first century and to us and asks the obvious and rhetorical question: **Since all of this is going to happen, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness?**

Do you think it possible that Peter is speaking to people who are not godly and to some extent holy? From my standpoint I think not. I think he is addressing people who are doing their best to be godly, to be people of integrity. And I think he is trying to affirm that in his words. Because implicit in his words is a recognition of the integrity and the godliness in which they are already involved.

And the obvious response to the question of how we ought to live is that we would live holy and godly lives, basing our lives on righteousness and on that which survives tests and radical changes.

And with that said, I have a question for all of us. What difference does any one person's godliness make in the grand scheme of things?

Look around you. There are persons of honesty and integrity and righteousness all over the room. What difference does any one person's efforts make?

I expect that some people might say, "What is the big deal? I know many people of integrity. I am just doing my little piece of work in my own corner." And many people do not differentiate between minimizing and humility.

If people insist on minimizing their lives and their influence, none of us has the power to stop that. But I will say that your integrity and your honesty emanates from you like a fragrance. Your righteousness and your godliness bear witness to you in ways you perhaps overlook. What is the value of a person who is always honest? What is the value of a person of integrity? What is the value of a person who can always be depended on?

In the circle of your life which is your world, persons of integrity exude a stability that many hunger for.

You will not do yourself or the world a favor by minimizing that witness. Rather pray that God would bless who you are toward more holiness, godliness, and righteousness.

And Peter says that very thing at the end of today's reading. He says, **Therefore beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by God at peace, without spot or blemish.**

And so another major point for him is purity. Maintain your honesty, your integrity. Maintain being the best person you can be. And if it is possible to be even more of a person of purity, a person of peace, then go for it.

And so to see the broad stroke of Peter's sermon, he started with saying that God is God, but that God can be known. And then he speaks of a spiritual fire that will burn away all that is not holy and godly, and he implies that what is based on integrity will survive and thrive.

Then he directs the question to all of us. In your waiting, in your anticipating God, how ought you to be living? And he answers his own question by saying, **beloved, while you are waiting, strive to be found by God at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation**

Beloved in Christ. The more we know God, the more we know that God can be known. The more we are like Jesus, the more we know that we can ever continue to be more like him. We are all travelers who travel toward glory, toward purity, toward integrity, toward peace. Are you pure? In Christ there is an unforeseen purity ahead.

Are you a person of integrity? In Christ there is the beginning of a new integrity, a new compassion, a new kindness. Are you a person who is known to be at peace. In Christ there comes a peace unforeseen. There are many ways to minimize and underestimate a life in Christ, a life of integrity, a life of peace. Do not do it. But in your unique journey, your unique calling, strive to be found by God at peace, without spot or blemish. Amen.

Charles M. Pope