

Your God Will Come and Save You

In the name of him who does all things well, dear friends in Christ: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times ...” With these well known words Charles Dickens began his famous novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, a story that unfolds against the backdrop of the French Revolution. The line highlights the paradox of the era. It was, on one hand, an age of reason and enlightenment. People were throwing off the shackles of an oppressive monarchy and a corrupt, overbearing aristocracy. They were creating a new society based on the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity – that is, brotherly love. On the other hand it was a time of great folly as the revolution that aspired to such high ideals descended into the violent, unthinking, and horrifically cruel excesses of the reign of terror: a hate-filled bloodbath that ended up consuming most if not all of the leaders and thinkers who started the revolution in the first place. It was the best and worst of times, indeed.

And yet that description fits pretty much every era of human history including the time in which we live. Our lives are usually full of stark contradictions. Great good is always accompanied by great evil. And the things we intend for good all too often go bad. Take, for example, our nation’s military incursions into Afghanistan and Iraq. We had noble goals. The former was undertaken to topple the Taliban and prevent terrorist organizations from using the country as a safe haven from which to operate. The latter was, ostensibly at least, done to prevent a dangerous and unstable dictator from acquiring weapons of mass destruction, and to bring the blessings of freedom and democracy to the oppressed citizens of Iraq. Fifteen years later, we’re still hunting terrorists in Afghanistan. And Iraq has pretty much descended into a civil war that is anything but civil. Large portions of the country and neighboring Syria (another Mideast hotspot) are controlled by ISIS – a malevolent incarnation of militant Islam that demonstrates that the whole problem is sort of like the mythical hydra: a creature with seven snake-like heads. You chop off one of them and seven more grow back in its place. All our efforts to suppress it have only resulted in more people wanting to go to join it. Meanwhile, in neighboring Iran – another nation known for harboring and supporting terrorists – they’re feverishly developing a nuclear program, which they assure us is only for peaceful purposes. From their perspective I suppose it is. The trouble is that when they say “peace”, they mean the state of affairs that will exist when they and their version of Islam win, and all of their enemies are dead. I say all of this is not to critique American foreign policy and those who have implemented it. I believe they’ve acted in good faith according to the best of their knowledge and abilities. My point is that the problems we’re trying to solve over there are a lot bigger and more complex than anyone anticipated, and that our efforts – though well intended – have created for us other unforeseen problems and in some cases new enemies. If the goal was to make the world a better and safer place, I don’t think we’ve achieved it. We’re still stuck in the paradox of living in the best and worst of times.

We see it in other places. Take technology, specifically the wonders of the internet. Now we’ve got instant access to almost endless information, education, entertainment, shopping, you name it. It’s all there: everything you could ask for, just a click of the mouse away – *and* in the convenience and privacy of your own home. But the very things that make it so tremendous are the things that make it so dangerous, as vast numbers of increasingly younger men and boys are becoming exposed and addicted to online pornography. We’re told that it’s actually rewiring their brains and rendering them incapable of forming normal relationships with women. Yes, it’s that bad. Online gambling addiction is also becoming a

huge problem. It's destroying lives, livelihoods, and families. And these are just a few of the evils that come to us through the internet.

Or still in the area of technology, take cell phones. Almost everyone has one. Now (in theory, anyway) you can talk to pretty much anyone you want whenever you want. Communication has never been so easy. But I read a study this past week that showed that we're actually talking to each other less. Why's that? It's because participating in a conversation requires your full attention in the present. But we are naturally lazy and selfish and don't want to give it. So we tend to send text messages instead. That way I can deal with you on my terms when I want. And if I want to ignore you, I can do that too. I'm sure you've seen the other end of this. A couple or family will be eating out together at a restaurant, and the whole time they're not talking to each other; no, they're texting and receiving messages from people who aren't there. We're communicating more than ever before, but we're losing the art of conversation. Again, it's the best and worst of times. With every blessing of technology, there comes also a curse.

We can find the same thing in any number of other aspects of life: in medicine, in finance, in politics, in education. We even find it here in the church. We are blessed to live in a land with absolute religious freedom. Our churches are comfortable, climate controlled, accessible to the mobility challenged. Never before have we had so available to us such sound doctrine, good bible study materials, well qualified pastors and teachers – I'm speaking of our synod as a whole. And what do we see? Empty pews, widespread biblical illiteracy, congregations in conflict and distress, young people disinterested and leaving the church in droves, budgets stretched to the limits, churches closing their doors because they can't afford to keep the lights on much less pay a pastor a living wage. Yes, even in the church we are living in the best and worst of times. And we're worried that it's only going to worse.

And that is precisely why these worst times are the very best for the church's message. You see, in everything I've mentioned we've noted that no matter how well intentioned people are or how good things get, there's always a downside. We want the world to be a better place because we know it's not right. Something about it is broken and needs improvement. We want to fix it. We want to save it. But we always come up short of the goal. And we always will.

Why? Because what's really broken is *us*. We are not as we should be. We don't think right. We don't hear right. We don't speak right. We don't do right. We are in sin and rebellion against God. And because of our sin the whole world is under a curse. Nothing is as it should be – the way God designed and intended to be. And we know it. How? It's because the Lord has placed a longing in our hearts; a distant collective memory, if you will, that remembers when it was always only the best of times; when everything was good and perfect and right; when there was no downside to anything. He has caused us to yearn for that again.

Why? First, so that we will discover the futility of trying to bring it about ourselves. As we've seen, we're not capable of making it happen. And secondly, so that despairing of ourselves and our puny efforts, we will turn our anxious hearts to him and hear what he has to say.

Which brings me at long last to today's Old Testament reading and the powerful promises God speaks to his people through the prophet Isaiah. "Say to those who have an anxious heart, 'Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.'" Are you upset with what you see going on in the world? Are you frustrated with the way nothing works out as you hope – with your lack of

ability to fix things? Are you worried about the way things seem to be heading in the future? Stop. Look up. Listen. God is speaking. He's promising to come to you in your distress. And by his promises he is delivering to you the strength and courage to endure.

He says he's coming with vengeance; that is, he's coming to judge the wicked and punish them for their evil deeds. He's says he's coming with recompense, that is with a reward for the righteous and repayment for the losses they've suffered. He says he's coming to save those who are his.

In the original context, these words were meant for the people of Judah who would be taken into exile. They were going to be ripped from their homes and families, sent to penal colonies in distant Babylon, and there they would suffer much. It would be for them the worst of times. But the Lord had a purpose for it. It was to get them to long for what they had before and lost. It was to get them to stop trusting in themselves and the false gods they'd adopted. It was to bring them to repentance and faith in him, the one true God. And for many of them it worked. And when the time was right, the Lord did exactly as he promised. He brought judgment against the wicked nation that had taken them into exile. He set his faithful people free. He brought them back and resettled them in the Promised Land. He restored to them their inheritance. And he recovered for them all that they had lost and more.

In a broader, prophetic sense, however, these words of promise are about God coming to save his people in the person of Jesus. His mission was to fix what was broken and recover all that had been lost. This is especially evident in Isaiah's words, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; the lame man shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy." We can't hear these words without thinking about the life and ministry of Jesus. But the thing to see is that it's not just that he performs some healing miracles here and there on a few people like in today's Gospel. No, the point is that he's restoring creation to the way it was before, to the way it was meant to be. Through Jesus the curse is being undone.

How can Jesus do this? Only by taking the curse on himself. That's what his cross and passion were all about: the vengeance of God against a world full of sinners falling upon the righteous One, so that the proper recompense of the righteous One might be received by those who place their trust and hope in him.

That was then; but it goes on today. Even now, Jesus still comes to his people to save them. He comes in his Word and Sacraments through the ministry of his church. And by his Word and Holy Spirit he performs healing miracles among us. He enables us to see what can't be seen, like his body and blood in the Holy Supper; he gives us to hear and understand the saving Gospel that can't be known or believed in by our natural abilities; he empowers us to rise from our sin-crippled limbs and walk on the path of righteousness, and he looses our stumbling tongues to confess his truth and sing with joy of the salvation he gives to us.

And sing of it we do, both because of the restoring grace and forgiveness we are receiving, and also because we know that ultimately Jesus will restore all things – as Isaiah foretells when he says, "For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water." It's a return to Garden of Eden and the total healing of creation. That's what we're looking forward to: an eternity when once again it will be only the best of times. That's the message the world in these worst of times needs so desperately to hear. And that's why we must continue to trust in and

speaking forth the truth that our God comes to save us through Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!