

33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time “Hell Exists So Don’t Procrastinate.”

Bishop Frank Schuster

As the days get shorter and shorter, darker and darker and damper and damper, even the Church’s selection of scripture readings this time of year tend to get dark as well. The readings always get apocalyptic this time of year as we approach the solemnity of Christ the King that represents the end of the liturgical year. Jesus says in front of the Temple in Jerusalem, “All that you see here- the days are coming when there will not be left a stone upon another stone that will not be thrown down.” These are frightening words. And for the history buffs out there, Jesus’ prophesy here actually came to pass. In 70 A.D. the temple was in fact destroyed. All that was left was the western retaining wall, which is now called the Wailing Wall, the most holy site in Judaism.

Malachi in the first reading joins in the apocalyptic chorus saying, “Lo, the day is coming, blazing like an oven, when all the proud and all evildoers will be stubble.” Even St. Paul is encouraging his disciples against apathy in the second reading. Why are the readings this November becoming more and more frightening? My friends, my take is that the readings this time of year are warning us against spiritual apathy. As the days get shorter, it becomes easier to go through our days on autopilot, one cup of coffee at a time, forgetting what is important. The scriptures this time of year warn us to guard against spiritual laziness by reminding us that we are mortal and that we do not have all the time in the world. We should not put off to tomorrow what we should be doing today. And this is a very difficult and challenging reminder.

After all, who here wants to think about their mortality? Raise your hand! I don’t want to think about death. I don’t want to think about heaven or hell right now. I want to think about football. Go Seahawks, right? During November, however, the Gospel says, “Tough, I got news for you pal, we better think about it”. We will die someday. There will be an accounting of my life! There is a real possibility of heaven or hell in my future. And time isn’t as plentiful as I would like to delude myself into thinking! Yes, my friends, heaven is real. However, hell is real also. Hell is the consequence of living our lives contrary to God’s will. It isn’t what God wants for us. God sent us his Son that we might turn to him and be saved. God has given us the gift of time for us to move about. God has given us the gift of talents so that we may build up his kingdom. God has given us the gift of life, our world and our relationships. But these gifts are temporary. We will give them all back to God someday and much sooner than we would like. The Gospels challenge us to contemplate those areas in our lives that we know we need to correct but have been putting off because we have been lulled in complacency that we have all the time in the world...when we don’t.

We lull ourselves into thinking that there is no rush to get our spiritual priorities in order. However, the bible has a way of reminding us this time of year that the road to hell was paved by people who thought there was no rush. C.S. Lewis underscores that point in his book, the Screwtape Letters. I love that book. For those uninitiated to this book, Screwtape is a demon writing to his nephew Wormwood giving advice on how to ruin souls. He finishes the twelfth letter to his nephew with the wicked advice, “Indeed, the safest road to hell is the gradual one –

the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts, your affectionate uncle Screwtape.”

Jesus is very clear in his warning to us today: there will come a day when we will be put on the spot as a disciple and called to give witness, a time when we must choose between what is right and what is easy. To prepare ourselves for that time of trial, we should not put off to tomorrow what we should be doing today when it comes to the care of our souls. And as a professional procrastinator myself, I find this a helpful message. A pastoral invitation could be for us to look at our relationships in our families and find a broken relationship to heal. Let’s heal the relationships in our family starting today so we can enjoy Thanksgiving at the end of the month. It might make for a less awkward dinner. Let’s look at how we spend our resources of time, talent, and treasure. Are we pleasing God with how we share these gifts, especially in our concern for the poor and hungry? But first and foremost, let’s look at our relationship with God and, if necessary, make the right choices so that our souls become healthier and holier, united with God’s will for us. And perhaps our souls can then demonstrate that love for God a little more by being kinder towards others and compassionate, especially to the most vulnerable in our world, from the unborn to the elderly and every stage and demographic in between. Ultimately, we are invited to better witnesses and stewards of all the gifts God has given us in his creation. For at the end of time, there will be an accounting.

This is a difficult challenge. Some might call this message uncomfortable. It is an uncomfortable message in an uncomfortable time of year. But if the readings say anything today, they say one thing loud and clear. Being a follower of Jesus isn’t easy. Being a Christian takes work. The good news is Christianity shows us the path to heaven. There is a catch though. The road to heaven is the one that includes carrying a cross.