

The Day of the Lord is today, and tomorrow, and the next day...

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, November 13, 2011.

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18; Psalm 90:1-12; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

There's a lot of talk these days about the lack of young adults in the Episcopal Church. Why, we ask, can't we attract more young adults? We're reasonable, balanced, moderate, well-adjusted, polite, mild-mannered (Garrison Keillor says that people like to make fun of what he calls our "excessive blandness")—does that sound like the self-described image of your typical teenager-emerging-into-adult who is ready to take on the world? While my daughter Julian has her list of things that excite her, that list includes things like getting body piercings, performing street theater, and Occupying Wall Street. Going to the Episcopal Church on Sunday morning isn't usually on that list

I am by education an historian—specifically European and Russian history. When I was a young radical college student, I found Europe fascinating—except for England. I absolutely refused to study England—because if you're a young person who wants to experience the excitement of the world, England is not the place to look. England was moderate. England was reasonable. In other words, England was boring. When the Revolutions of 1848 blew across Europe and violently toppled throne after throne, the English went their own pitifully mature, one might say, phlegmatic, way. "Excuse me, sir, but I believe you're sitting on my throne." "Oh, dear me, I am so sorry. Please do take it back, with my apologies."

That's the Anglican temperament. Don't you love it? As Anglicans—which is what we call ourselves when we're not mad at the Communion—and as Episcopalians, this attitude of moderation and balance and reason is our heritage, and a proud one. We don't get all nervous about the end of the world. When it comes, it comes. We don't get very enthusiastic talking about hell, Matthew's interminable outer darkness. We don't even like to threaten other people with it, to try to scare them towards salvation. In fact, Episcopalians in general are pretty laid back about salvation. It too will come.

In lots of ways, this is good. This weekend's Diocesan Convention was nothing if not lavish in its politeness, true affection, even—even during the debates on the resolutions. We're a pretty easygoing lot. The danger, though, is that we may slide from being accommodating to being complacent. Zephaniah scolds his people for resting on their laurels, which is what I think he means by "resting on their dregs." So when we Episcopalians look toward the Day of the Lord, we're not as likely to get overly enthusiastic or fearful as we are to feel rather smug about it.

So when Zephaniah sends a warning about what the Day of the Lord will be like for those who "rest complacently on their dregs," is he talking to us? What do you care about salvation? Are we being reasonable when we're silent on the topic—or are we just too comfortable to care? (By the way, did you hear what Steve Jobs' last words were? "O wow, O wow, O wow.")

There's no doubt in the biblical lessons for today. The Day of the Lord is here. Zephaniah is a little gory about what he thinks will happen—blood poured out like dust, flesh poured out like dung, and so on. The person who wrote the psalm just reminds us to be

mindful—“teach us to number our days, [so] that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.” Paul, to the Thessalonians and now to us, urges us to be awake and alert so we don’t miss it—as if, when the Lord comes, we might actually sleep through it. So—watch out, be aware, and be ready. It’s coming to get you.

But Jesus comes to tell us about another Day of the Lord. Matthew, of course, messes up the end, but Jesus’ story is about an extravagant, lavish, generous, giving God who then asks us to account for what God gives us. It’s a daily wondering. What have we done with the love that God has created us for? What have we done with the forgiveness that God gives to us? What have we done with God’s table hospitality, with the good earth that God has blessed us with, with the love that he poured upon us? Have we shared all that with our neighbors? Have we multiplied God’s generosity? Have we given it away?

Or do we hoard as our private possession what God has so freely given? Do we take God’s abundant love make it scarce, like one who hides his master’s treasure? For example, forgiven ones: Have you ever refused to forgive a wrong? Do you sometimes carefully ration the love in you—a little here, a little there, not showing too much, just in case you run out? Have you ever hidden your caring beneath defenses of cynicism, or resentment, or fear of being hurt?

Of course we have. But Jesus tells us over and over again: The One who created us is a loving God, a God who blessed us with bunch of talents—which is to say, a divine sackfull of love, and forgiveness, and mercy, and grace. And God gives abundantly, even extravagantly. We won’t run out. Every day is a Day of the Lord. Every day, we are given a piece of salvation. Every day, we are given a godly amount of love and forgiveness. We don’t need to worry about squandering it. After all, God has already squandered it, on us. God’s love and mercy will never run out, and if we are as spendthrift with God’s love and mercy as God is, we are good and faithful servants indeed. But if we sometimes forget to get excited and start getting too laid back about our saving graces—well, there’s another Day of the Lord tomorrow, and the next day, and the next. Thanks be to God.