

"When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come." (Mark 13:7)

"And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (Hebrews 10:24-25)

The story goes that someone asked Martin Luther what he would do if he knew the world would end tomorrow. Luther said, "I'd plant a tree."

It's a lovely phrase. You could put that on a bumper sticker. Yet I find the harder I look at it, the stranger and truer it becomes. Think of all the steps in planting a tree. You put on your leather work gloves, and smell those tannins for perhaps the last time. You take up an iron and wooden shovel, whose hardness and strength and weight are about to disappear. You dig your hole, pouring into it not only your unforgiving sweat, but some of the last few minutes you or anyone else will have in this world. You settle the earth with care around the sapling's roots and make the tree stable: But those roots have only a few hours to grow. The tree will never mature. The earth itself, every ounce, will soon be gone.

The defiance in Luther's voice is appealing. The world's ending? Plant a tree! But this attitude is costly. You cannot do all that—you cannot plant a tree at the end of the world—without loving trees, loving dirt and shovels and work gloves, loving the very sweat of digging. And you've got to love them knowing they'll all be gone soon. You've got to love trees for their own sake, for their

good created beauty, and nothing else at all. For a true tree-lover—as I suppose Luther must have been—that love comes easily. But the more truly you love trees, the more truly you love the tree you're planting, the harder it can be to know it will soon be no more.

Last week, we heard of a poor widow putting her last few pennies into the treasury of the temple. It's a striking story in its own right, and a staple of stewardship campaigns. It's a story about how God will do amazing things with whatever we can give. Yet the full force of that story only comes as we read the next part, the part we just heard. That widow's mite, her two cents' worth, had gone, with those of thousands like her, toward building the temple in Jerusalem. And as the disciples admire those very stones and pavements, the beautiful worship space of the people of Israel, Jesus comes down like a hammer. "Not one stone will be left here upon another," he says. All this beauty, for which the widow had sacrificed her last, would soon be gone.

This was a cosmic statement for Jesus. From the Jewish perspective, this temple was the one place in the world where sacrifice was offered to the true God. Some of Jesus' contemporaries believed that the worship in that space was why God continued letting a wicked and idolatrous world exist: The temple, for them, was the secret engine of the universe's life. So it is no surprise that when Jesus says the temple will be destroyed, his closest disciples corner him the first chance they get, and ask him about the end of the world.

What Jesus tells his disciples this morning is complicated. It has its

cosmic, universal side, but it's also bound up with the politics of the Roman empire and Jewish resistance movements. But there is a bumper-sticker version of his remarks: "Don't panic!"—which is always good advice for the end of the world. It has echoes of Luther, or rather, Luther has echoes of Christ. When everything is upside down, when nothing looks like it can last, when you can't possibly plan for the future—then, most of all, we need to be planting trees and planning to stick together.

This time last year, even in the afterglow from President Obama's election, we were seeing lots of headlines about economic catastrophe. Today, the panic seems to have died down a bit on Wall Street, but Centre Street is still hurting pretty badly. Something like one in five Americans is out of work today. At the academic conference I attended last weekend, there were four hundred people signed up to interview for thirty-nine teaching jobs. Anyone looking for a job in Boston would have a right to think it was the end of the world: Friends of mine, and people in this community, have spent a year or more on the market. And that doesn't just affect people who are out of work. It makes those of us who have steady jobs cling to them, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Dr King had it right: When anyone is out of work, all of us suffer with them, because we all know that could be us.

That is why your stewardship, your commitment to St John's, is so much more important today. The truth is, it is never a good time to run a stewardship campaign. In lean times, people hesitate to give their money away. And in flush

times, people hesitate to give their money away. In the last few weeks of ordinary time, we start to look toward Advent and the Second Coming of Christ. Those tend to overlap with stewardship season—a coincidence I find oddly appropriate. When you ask people to open their wallets, that is always the end of the world.

In a sense, this community is sustained entirely by God, whose presence we ask in the eucharistic prayer and find around the table. But in another sense, God uses us to sustain each other. We are God's hands, God's provision, to one another. And yes: We are also God's fundraisers, and this is God's pledge drive. Nonprofits love monthly pledges because they let us make our budgets in advance. That's truest of all when times are hard. Later this week, most of you—those on the mailing list—should get a stewardship packet in the mail. I hope that you'll consider proportional giving, a set proportion of your income, right off the top. And even more than that, I hope you'll pledge, rather than just giving week to week. That commitment is costly, most of all when times are hard. But in my own life, I've found it a useful gesture, a sign of hope, planting a tree at the world's end.

As Christ's people, we live into community in the face of death and destruction. That is simply who we are. Every time we gather around God's table, we proclaim Christ's death and resurrection until he comes again. And in the face of that cataclysmic, history-changing event, we come together. We form a circle, like a trunk. We are rooted in the nourishment of Christ's body and

blood. In the face of all our troubles, we plant ourselves like a tree, or a vine.

We all have different ways of planting ourselves in God, different practices to do so, different ways of describing our relationship with God. That's as it should be. But in this community, we all share Christ's table in common. It is our common language, our common soil. We can hold each other together and up, even as our worlds end—which they do, with every job loss and divorce and death in the family. That's what we're here for. And if your world is ending a little bit this morning, I hope you can come to this table, and plant yourself a little more in God, and all for love's sake.