

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia
on November 18th 2007 by the Reverend Dr. Richard P.
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Proper 28 Year C 2007 RCL

Isaiah 65:17–25

Canticle 9 (Isaiah 12) or Psalm 98: 5–10

2 Thessalonians 3:6–13

Luke 21:5–19

[Isaiah 12:2] “Surely, it is God, who saves me.”

Years ago I remember flying in a terrible storm. It was in the Midwest, and I remember that I was on my way to give a lecture someplace. When I got to the airport the national president of my learned society was also there. I had not known she would be in town, but at a large university a lot of people come and go all the time. We said hello and arranged to sit together on the plane and I think we had no idea there was a storm until after takeoff. Because what I remember most clearly was how I would have been really worried if she had not been there. The plane was bouncing around a lot. The one or two times I looked up the aisle I had a visual sense of the turbulence. But she kept talking to me about some research of hers, and I knew that if I survived the flight, and wanted to get ahead in my field, I had to pay attention to every word and ask intelligent questions too. Sometimes distraction is a useful thing. I gladly let her distract me that day.

Another time, I was flying from New Orleans on a summer evening. Again there was no weather until after takeoff. And this time there was no turbulence. Just the captain telling us we likely would be late because there were thunderstorms all around and he was going to have to fly around them instead of going in a straight line. I remember this pretty well, because this was back in the days when planes mostly were never full. So, since I had a whole row to myself I put my seat back, got a drink, and spent a long time watching out the window.

It was magnificent. Even though the night sky was a sort of inky blue, it was different from the dense black of the storm clouds. And the storms were like mighty towers, stretching from earth to heaven, or at least farther than I could see. And we were just wending our way around them. Every now and again you could see

lighting bolts inside one of the dark towers—the only sign that somewhere on the ground there was a storm.

To me it looked very much like the opening of John's Gospel: "in him was life, and the life was the light of all people; the light shines in the darkness, and the dark did not overcome it;" which in turn is very much like the opening of Genesis: "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." I could imagine God was in the inky night and in the mighty storms and in the peaceful airstream too. This, I thought, must be what it looks like when God looks upon creation.

Well, be that as it may, I remembered these stories when I saw this week's scripture and began to think about how it seems like life is all full of storms. I don't know what your week was like but mine was a series of crises every waking moment and none of them very important but all demanding my full attention. Because you see, sometimes I think it is I who provides the glue that holds everything together; that I am the power that keeps all of the magicians' plates spinning on all those poles so nothing falls apart. But just about every time I let myself think that way something comes along to remind me that I am not God, and that means I am not the glue and I certainly am not the power and it is not up to me to control anything, let alone everything. And then, then the chaos has its own sort of beauty, and I realize I am here to enjoy the ride.

Friday night after way too long a week and way way too long a ride home from Long Island I finally stretched out on the sofa. I have a really great sofa. Just about every time I stretch out there I remind myself that I really ought to just stay there. Let everybody else manage those spinning plates But then I grab my laptop and back I go into the maelstrom of daily life.

In the letter to the Thessalonians Paul is cautioning folks not to enjoy their sofas too much. He says to keep away from those who live in idleness, from those who sit and gossip—"busybodies" he calls them. They will distract you, he says. He even goes so far as to tell them to do their work quietly, to earn their own livings, not to be weary of doing the work God has given them to do. Now I was suspicious about that word "busybodies" so I looked in the Greek and sure enough that is what it says—"busy about other folks' affairs, meddling, officious."

When I was in Greece last year I noticed that every night about 9:30 a whole bunch of older gentlemen would appear suddenly in the taverna where they all would sit together and over coffee and a cigarette they would talk animatedly but in whispers. After a few minutes they would all vanish again. Do you suppose this is what Paul meant by idle busybodies? I was worried about this too, so I looked it up in Google, and sure enough it is part of Greek culture. Every night the guys are sent out to gather the day's gossip, which they disguise by having coffee. When they get home they tell their wives all the gossip. So there you have it, in Greek culture, the whole New Testament in a nutshell.

In the Gospel Jesus says a lot of frightening things about some future event that will be heralded by wars and insurrections, by earthquakes and famines and great signs from heaven. Some preachers think this is a prophecy about the end of time, but most experts think Jesus was talking about the temple in Jerusalem and its destruction, which definitely did follow Jesus' ministry by about 30 years. I think we have to understand that scripture is given to us as revelation. The Bible is not a manual or a handbook. It is a vision, in which we are meant to see ourselves and our own lives. Whatever else might come down the road, the fact is, that in every time since Adam and Eve there has been war and insurrection and famine and earthquakes. And there are always great signs from heaven. Those—the signs—are meant for us. To remind us that God is God and we are not. The turbulence Jesus points to is in our hearts—and for our souls.

At the end of that passage Jesus says “by your endurance you will gain your souls.” This, of course, is what Paul is trying to say to his idle gossiping Thessalonians (and to us)—there is work God has given us to do, and we are to do it with faith in our hearts and with Jesus' name on our tongues. And in fact, this is what Isaiah says as well: “Be glad and rejoice, sing praises to your God, make God's deeds known among the people.”

It means, hold on to your faith, hold on for your faith, because God is all in all. Do not let the busy-ness of life distract you from the majesty of God. Be glad and rejoice, because God is doing a wonderful thing—in you—if you will let it happen.

It turns out we do not have to manage all of those spinning plates. That is God's job. But we do have to endure. We have to endure in loving God and in loving one another. Because by that loving endurance we will gain our souls. Amen.

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