

Enduring the Tough Times ~ November 14, 2010
Malachi 4:1-2a; II Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

One would have to be living on a desert island with absolutely no contact with the outside world not to know that so many are enduring tough times. For some the times are full of war and rumors of war. For others, the economy strikes terror in their hearts as they see investments and the hope of retirement fade away. For many, the loss of a job, a home, a familiar way of life is becoming a reality. I cannot count how many people have told me that their homes are in threat of foreclosure or that they have lost their jobs. It's a fearful thing to think that you might lose all you have.

As I have told you often, when I go through times of tremendous difficulty, I finally get to the point of lighting a candle, or fifty, and simply telling God that the whole mess is in God's hands. There is nothing more I can do, I am about at the end of my rope. Then, for one reason or another, something turns and things begin to go right. Never fast enough for me, or full enough, but things turn enough for me to see a little light flickering in the distance.

And, I know, that somehow, as Malachi tells us, the good will be rewarded and the bad will get theirs. We may not see this happen but it does, often, in subtle ways.

Our days of difficulty come nowhere near the problems those who decided to follow Jesus faced in the early years. Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians reminds us that things were not going to be easy for this early band of Christians. It would even be disenchanted by members of their little church, who wanted the rewards of being in the group, but did not do any work to strengthen it. In the early church, people lived together and shared all that they owned. There were rules and regulations that tried to keep some sort of order among them. One of the rules was that if someone chose not to work, there would be no food for them from the community pantry. Things must have been tough since Paul restated this rule.

The "busybodies," who could never quite rise to the occasion to lend a helping hand, were as much a problem then as they are now. I am sure they were very good at pointing out what needed to be done without offering any solutions at the least or pitching into help at the most. But, instead of being discouraged by these slackers, those who worked for the good of all were to continue doing so, Paul said. They were not to complain about all they did but were to remember to never grow weary in doing what was right.

The greatest blessing for that little body of Christ and for us, are those who quietly go about their work, without complaint, knowing that what they are doing is the right thing. If there had not been, and were not still, such people in our midst, every church would fail. The focus these people have is on following the way Jesus taught as they grow into the very best humans and Christians they can be, knowing that we all have been called to serve one another and God. People who understand this know that words can easily follow one after another, but that good deeds set an example that words can never equal.

In the gospel of Luke Jesus is warning about the end times. In this time of year the lectionary readings for each Sunday speak of these times preparing us for the coming of

Advent and the re-entrance of the Christ Child into the world, our awareness and our hearts.

As long as our faith has existed, those who have been followers have been warned that the end is coming. The early Christians believed that it was coming in their time and it didn't. Our forefathers and mothers were warned that it was coming in their day and age, and it didn't. Now, we, too, are told by some that the end times are approaching. Some see signs all around us—signs that have been present, it seems, for all time.

Jesus told those closest to him that they would have to endure tough times before all would be over. Some would be put to death, others would be betrayed, and others would be called up before the authorities to explain and defend themselves and their faith. He also reminded them that only God knew when this would happen. No human could predict the day or the hour so they were to be wary of those who came in his name. Until the end came, they were to endure and keep their hope and their faith alive and never grow weary of doing good.

We, too, need to keep strong in our hope and our faith. There really is nothing else we can do. We can continue to work quietly never growing weary of the good we do; never being disappointed for long when an outcome is not the one we had hoped for. We are allowed a bit of disappointment, but not so much that it colors our entire lives and makes them seem not worth the living. When disappointments come, and they do in every life, we need to learn the lessons they bring and then move forward again. It is far too easy to turn to dark thoughts and dark deeds. It is always better to hang on and appreciate what it is we have, no matter what it has been we have lost.

The good news in all of this is that we are enabled by God to work through difficult and troubling times under girded by our faith. We are enabled to make all things new again. In time we gain a fresh new perspective and are able to move forward in life. For this we must be grateful. Amen