

Sermon for the 6th Sunday after Pentecost (B), Proper 10, 16vii2006, 08:30, 10:00  
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania  
Holy Eucharist / Service of Word & Prayer  
Amos 7:7-15, Psalm 85:8-13, Ephesians 1:3-14, Mark 6:14-29

J. J. !

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was  
and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

*In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace that He lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight He has made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure that He set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth.*

*-- Ephesians 1:7-10*

How is this life, this world, going to turn out?  
Fundamentalists of all faiths seem to look forward to a fiery conflagration, the Biblical Armageddon or its equivalent. According to this view, all of the evil will get what is coming to them, and the same punishment will befall the spiritually indifferent, the lukewarm or even the sincerely

confused. Such groups, whether Hamas, Hezbollah or Al-Qaeda and other Muslim extremists, the Aum Shinrikyo Buddhist sect in Japan, our own home-grown 'Christian Identity' movement and its adherents, such as Timothy McVeigh, Sikh extremists, Jewish-Zionist extremists, Hindu extremists, Protestant or Catholic extremists in Northern Ireland or our own little bit of Ulster here all have one thing in common: *They all claim to know the will of God.* From this it follows, in their logic, that they all claim to be the friends of God, the doers of God's will, the servants of God's cause in this world. They all claim to be able to judge who are the enemies of God, whether individuals or whole nations, and they *do* judge them. And they all look forward to the destruction of the ungodly, *some* among them being willing to kill and even to kill themselves in the act of killing others. This concept

is not new to us in this country, for we have experienced the fury of such fanaticism at the hands of both Americans and foreigners alike. In the bombing of the Murrow Center in Oklahoma Center and in the attacks on our nation's capital and on New York City we have seen a fiery revelation, the global rise of religious violence, what author Mark Juergensmeyer has termed 'terror in the mind of God' in his book of the same title (*Terror in the Mind of God. The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. Berkeley: University of California, 2001).

This almost gleeful anticipation of the destruction of an ungodly world by an angry and wrathful god who, it is imagined, will get even with all the ungodly who have yet to suffer on behalf of true believers who seem to do nothing *but* suffer for their faith, is not unknown in Judaism and Christianity. The biblical

utterances like those of Amos the 'un-prophet' in today's First Reading are many. The Early Church certainly looked forward to the self-destruction of the power of Rome, which was not long in coming after the Christian era had begun. Church Fathers such as Tertullian taught, even before he became a heretic, that the reason for the resurrection of the body was so that the evil could be judged and made to suffer, a tender thought that is echoed in the very last words of the Athanasian Creed which you may read in the forepart of our hymnal. And who of us, even those who do not usually listen to so-called 'Christian radio' or read the *Left Behind Series* instead of *Harry Potter* or—much, much better—the *Chronicles of Narnia*, has not met that Christian relative, friend or co-worker whose motto in life seems to be best expressed in that favorite adage of the radio broadcaster, Paul Harvey, "Behave, or be damned"?

As if it were that simple, as if our 'behaving' could banish sin and sinfulness and render a Savior, and the redemption of our nature through His sacrifice unnecessary! As if *we*—of all people, the very people whose salvation was purchased by the blood of Christ!—could distinguish between God's enemies and friends, and call God's friends *we* whose rebellion from the beginning of our history made necessary the innocent death on Calvary, for *us*—not for some *other* imagined enemies of God, not for some *other* imagined evildoers who attempt at every turn to exchange places with God and to rule in His place!

No, we do not make such judgments against others, and in God's mind and will we see not a vision of destruction but rather one of *hope*. Why? Because Almighty God has not made such judgments against *us!*

Listen again to the Apostolic witness of Ephesians: "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace." This is true. This is most certainly true! From the day of our Baptism we have experienced what Saint Paul calls 'grace upon grace,' above all in receiving assurance of the forgiveness of our sins, *real* sin of people born into that broken relationship with God since the dawn of history, *real* sins committed by people who really do rebel against God and the mercy of God in the way we treat one another and ourselves.

Forgiveness and the call to new life is God's response to our sinfulness and to our sinning. This should tell us something. This *does* tell us something, namely, to let the Apostolic writer speak again, "With all wisdom and insight He has made known to us the mystery of His will,

according to His good pleasure that He set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth.” The way we tend to treat others, the way we expect to be treated by others, or simply the general ‘way of the world’ as we may observe it around us or in the daily and hourly news in these last terrible days might lead us to expect something quite different, something like that ‘terror in the mind of God’ that motivates so many millions today. The simple fact that it is *God* Whom we do offend when we either play God or fail to pass the merciful love of God toward us on to others *might* lead us to expect God to punish us for that, and to demand satisfaction of us and our kind through not only repentance but retribution as well. But the ‘wisdom,’ the reality of which we read in Ephesians is quite different from that dread of punishment.

God's plan is not to destroy, but to *restore*, not to strike and shatter, but to 'gather up': ". . . according to His good pleasure that He set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth." A very early theologian of the Church—some say the *first* theologian ever—wrote and wrote and wrote about the tremendous *hope* he found in those words, the *restoration* of all things by God the Father for the sake of Christ. For the Egyptian monk and theologian, Origenes, this meant that, either in time or in eternity, everything and everyone broken and estranged from God would be restored to God, that God's love in Christ is *so* great, *so* unconditional, *so* determined and, finally--because the Holy Spirit simply will not give up on the humanity created and sanctified through Christ, the Incarnate Word of God--so *irresistible* is God's love

that, Origenes was bold to say, even Satan himself will be converted and hell will be emptied of all its prisoners, free at last of their bondage to self through the mystery of God's grace. Through the *mystery* of God's grace, through that which cannot be explained, cannot finally even be *spoken about*, but that which simply *is* because it is of *God*, all things, *all* things will be restored and *no one* will be 'left behind.'

That to which and for which we hope in Christ to be restored is what the Apostolic witness calls our "inheritance," the 'last will and testament of Jesus Christ' in which we are named through our Baptism. That inheritance is waking up from the long dream, sometimes nightmare, of this life to *joy*, the joy that nothing that is of genuine love, nothing that is of God in this world has been lost, but that *all* has been restored to God forever,

and we with it. Faith means living as though that restoration has already happened, for, in eternity and in that time in our lives filled with the great mystery of our communion with the Holy Trinity of God, it already has.

✠ Amen.



Now to Him Who love us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to Our God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. ✠Amen.

**S. D. G. !**