

“LOOK AHEAD”

A Sermon delivered at St. John’s Lutheran Church, Alexandria, Virginia
On March 12/13, 2016 – 5th Sunday in Lent (LENT5c-16)
By the Rev. Dr. B. F. Nass, Pastor Emeritus

Dear faithful members and welcome guests of St. John’s:

As some of you know, I am an avid student of history. I also realize that for some, history is a complete bore and could care less when the War of 1812 occurred, how long the Thirty Years War lasted, or where the Berlin wall was located. But I love to dig into the past and try to connect the significant events and people of yore, and weave those puzzle pieces into the fabric of the present to get a clearer understanding of why and where we are today. As this year’s Lenten season approaches its critical climax this last week before the events of Holy Week, today’s scripture lessons strongly urge us to look not, back, but ahead – so that we have a vision that is realistic, courageous, and forward thinking beyond the resurrection.

The prophet, Isaiah, in today’s Old Testament lesson urges us to “*Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.*” In today’s Epistle lesson the apostle Paul describes himself as: “*forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*” And in today’s Gospel from Luke, Jesus’ parable of the wicked tenants asks us to look ahead to the inevitable consequences of those who killed the landowner’s son and tried to steal the vineyard. “What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them?” is the question Jesus poses. So, today, let’s take a gander at that parable under the theme: **Look Ahead!**

My goodness, whatever happened to Mr. Magoo? Mr. Magoo was a popular comic figure who was so nearsighted he couldn’t even see his very large nose in front of his face. Consequently, he is continually bumping into or knocking over things and completely misinterpreting everything he sees. In somewhat the same cartoon fashion, Jesus creates the character of the myopic vineyard tenants in today’s parable who couldn’t see the obvious consequences of their corrupt actions.

Contextually, this and all but one of the parables recorded by Luke occur after that benchmark verse at the end of chapter 9 where we are told that “*from that time on Jesus steadfastly set his face to Jerusalem.*” By the time this parable is recorded in chapter 20 ten chapters later on the Jerusalem journey, Jesus has already completed his three-day trip from Galilee, arrived at Jerusalem, triumphantly entered the city (which we will celebrate next Sunday), and kicked the bankers and business people and all their wares out of the temple.

The days following he spends right in the temple court which is somewhat akin to holding a Trump rally at both the Republican and Democrat headquarters. The ruling fragmented parties, consisting primarily of Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, scribes and priests, carry on a constant, contested debate with Jesus, challenging him to make judgments on loose-loose situations, questioning his authority, and trying to discredit or catch him in some major gaffe. Jesus is well aware of the motives of these short-sighted leaders who are presently preoccupied with plotting to kill him but find that impossible because of Jesus’ high favorable poll ratings with the common people.

It is into this kind of a contentious cauldron that Jesus tosses in the bitter potion of a predictive parable whose conclusion both shocks his hearers and exposes his antagonists as the shortsighted, self-seeking tenants or leaders of Israel.

As we peel back the layers, the meaning of the parable becomes quite clear. The owner of the vineyard is God. By his grace and loving kindness the people of Israel were chosen to be his beloved “vineyard.” God does all the hard work of creating, building, and planting the vineyard but he then turns its care and keeping over to Israel’s leaders who are the tenants.

The treatment of the servants sent to collect the owner's share of the harvest by the tenants is a clear description of the violent rejection of the OT prophets. The details of the parable are almost incredulous. For example, what owner would send his only beloved son after the previous and predicable criminal actions of the tenants? Are the tenants realistic in thinking that they will gain anything by killing the son? Did the tenants actually believe that the owner would not retaliate? Their Mr. Magoo approach did not look ahead to see what was inevitable. The image of the vineyard and the giving of the vineyard "to others" after unfaithful administration, reflect an early Christian explanation for the unbelief of Israel.

When interpreting such a parable, it is always important to ask, "Who is the main character in the story?" Though the traditional title suggests that it is the wicked tenants, a closer look suggests it is rather "The Patient Landowner." After his apparent folly in the repeated sendings of prophets, and finally sending his only beloved Son, the question in vs. 13 really asks the reader not only what the owner will do in response (which is obvious), but also what kind of person he is. His patience and repeated efforts suggest he is some kind of naïve fool. Thus, it engages us in a much larger question – namely, how we think of God.

Rather than solely an attack on unbelieving Israel for rejecting him, Jesus presents God as one who is longing for a response to his gifts of love and mercy. His ultimate stimulus was the sacrificial sending of his own beloved Son which was the result, not of a naïve misjudgment, but of a deliberate plan. By his Son's glorious and triumphant resurrection, God had done all the hard work in making us his vineyard. He has soaked the soil of our faith with baptismal water and we have become the "new thing" predicted through the prophet Isaiah.

As "worker's in the vineyard" today, we are reminded and urged to look ahead and be faithful responders to and stewards of the gifts God has entrusted to us and to treasure the gift of life, forgiveness, and grace that now permeates our total being. Jesus warns everyone, even those of us in the new community of faith, against the naïve notion that God's patience will last forever or that God does not have the capability of claiming his ownership of all created things.

So, dear saints of St. John's, when you leave this service of worship and climb into your car to leave, take a moment to notice two things; first, how big the windshield is compared to the rear view mirror. That becomes a parable in and of itself – namely, we do need to look at the past for safety and guidance, but it is much more important to look ahead to the big picture of what God has in store for you and where and how you can be God's fruitful vineyard wherever we are planted and then join with St. Paul, "forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called (you) heavenward in Christ Jesus." Amen