

TIMES OF RECKONING

Preached by the Rev. Thomas M. Kryder-Reid on the First Sunday of Advent, 27 November 2011, at Trinity Episcopal Church, Indianapolis. Scripture readings: Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-17; I Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37.

One of the most hauntingly beautiful and powerful novels I've ever read is Richard Llewellyn's *How Green Was My Valley*. The narrator, Huw Morgan, reminisces about his youth in one of the coal-rich valleys of South Wales. Near the end of the book, the callous mine owners and operators are more exploitative than ever. Huw's fellow townspeople and friends are on strike from the mines and at odds with one another. British soldiers have occupied the valley. The huge slag-heap from the mine creeps ever closer to Huw's childhood home, threatens to engulf it forever.

Well, well [laments Huw].

If I ever will have the privilege to meet God the Father face to face, I will ask did He laugh, or did He cry, when he saw and heard what we were doing down here...

Wonder to me He has never put a fist through the clouds to squash us flat... I am shivers to think of the Day.

The Day of Reckoning. [Ch. 41]

You and I heard just now about the Day of Reckoning. In the Isaiah lesson, the prophet's cry to God echoes Huw's: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." In the gospel, Jesus warns his disciples to "keep awake" and watch—for the Day of Reckoning can come at any time.

What do you make of that day? What does the Day of Reckoning mean to you?

I

Maybe you doubt or deny that such a day will ever come. Is this whole idea of God's final intervention into our world just a fancy of some overwrought ancient imagination?

Or maybe you wonder sometimes—as I have this past week with the failure of the federal budget-reduction "supercommittee"—whether or not we're in the hands of some capricious god or gods for whom our destiny is just a game. I remember a Gary Larson "Far Side" cartoon I once saw. The message isn't

exactly about the end of the world, but you could interpret it that way. The cartoon shows a kids' tree house perched high up in a big tree. At the base of the tree, a beaver is gnawing at the trunk, already four-fifths through, crunching away. The caption of the cartoon is the voice of one of the kids in the tree house: "OK," says the voice, "how many vote to call our new club 'The Buccaneers' and how many... OK, who's the wise guy who keeps cracking his knuckles?"

Or maybe, like Huw Morgan in the novel—like the author of the Isaiah passage in the lesson—maybe sometimes you find yourself both terrified by the prospect of God's final intervention into our world and praying fervently that God will intervene: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down."

The Day of Reckoning: What do you make of that day?

II

Every now and again, somebody comes along who helps me take comfort in realizing that the Day of Reckoning at the end of time may not be so different from the times of reckoning that can come at any time.

For me, one of those people was Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, Archbishop of Chicago.

Nearly thirty years ago, shortly after Cardinal Bernardin was installed as Archbishop of Chicago, I had the privilege of meeting him, if only briefly. He was addressing a huge crowd at the University of Chicago chapel. There must have been a thousand people in the place. At the end of his talk, he agreed to greet anyone who wished to come forward, and immediately people began forming two lines down the long main aisle. I thought to myself, "You know, I'm not Roman Catholic, I'm not gonna bother with this"—and then suddenly there I was in one of the lines, drawn by the warmth and genuineness of the man himself. As I introduced myself, I said something about hoping to prepare for the ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church. His eyes beamed. He said to me, "I'll pray for you, and you pray for me, too." For

those five seconds, I felt as though he and I were the only people there.

You may have heard the rest of the story about Cardinal Bernardin. Times of reckoning came to him again and again. And in his later years, they came like fists through the clouds.

First there was the accusation. A former seminarian claimed on national TV that Bernardin had abused him years before. Then just six months later came the diagnosis: the same cancer that had taken the life of the Cardinal's beloved father when Joseph was a little boy. Initially, the diagnosis was pancreatic cancer. Treatment followed, as did a few years of remission. Then he was diagnosed with liver cancer. And fifteen years ago, right around this time of year, Cardinal Bernardin died.

It would be easy to presume that all those fists through the clouds were God's. But Cardinal Bernardin never made that presumption.

Take the accusation, for starters: From the outset, he calmly denied his accuser's charges against him. Later, after the former seminarian confessed that the charges were groundless, Cardinal Bernardin went to visit the man, who was by then dying of AIDS. He said Mass with him, anointed him, shed tears with him, and restored the man's dignity.

Likewise the illness: From the onset, Cardinal Barnardin accepted the diagnosis with grace. He spoke of it openly. And even after he was diagnosed with liver cancer, following the remission—when he knew he was up against a death sentence—he refused the private entrance arranged for him at the hospital. He preferred instead to pass through the public hallways and waiting rooms so he could pray with other patients and encourage them. He made phone calls, wrote letters, paid return visits to numerous patients. He met and sympathized with a prisoner on death row.

In all kinds of ways, Cardinal Bernardin used both the false accusation made against him and the terminal diagnosis handed down to him as opportunities to practice reconciliation and healing. He acted on the prayer we'll all soon say to sum up our prayers—these memorable words attributed to a great saint [Francis, Friar of Assisi]: “Lord, make us instruments of your peace...” [The Book of Common Prayer, p. 833]

That's not to say he didn't feel fear, rage, and helplessness, just as any of us would. He felt pain all too keenly.

But he also knew that God who once walked this earth in the person of Jesus had himself been falsely accused, had himself reckoned with a death sentence.

And he knew that this same Jesus, this same “Son of Man” in whom his destiny was secure, had risen from death to overcome death's power forever.

Said Cardinal Bernardin shortly before he died: “I think of... [God's] plan for me... [I think of God's plan] by focusing on Jesus' message—that through suffering we empty ourselves and are filled with God's grace and love.”

III

Today, on this First Sunday of Advent, I would say much more than what the Cardinal said in his modesty. I would say he not only thought about but *showed* us God's plan.

What is God's plan?

God's plan is all about *reconciliation and healing*—at the end of time and at all our times of reckoning in between. Reconciliation and healing is God's promise to us now and always.

And yes, Jesus in his time was right there with God's plan, especially when he was falsely accused, especially when he had to reckon with his death sentence. How, after all, did he pray for his accusers—for his executioners? “Father, forgive them...” [Lk. 23:34] And how did he pray for the thief on the cross next to him, who reached out to him? “Today you will be with me in paradise.” [Lk. 23:43]

Likewise you and I, at any time of reckoning, can pray as saints pray: “Lord, make us instruments of your peace.”

You may be facing a time of reckoning now. Jesus says, “Keep awake.” Watch. And ask yourself, “How can I be an instrument of God's peace?”

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