ONE DAMNED THING AFTER ANOTHER?

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
University Lutheran Church
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"The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."(II Peter 3:9)

Thanksgiving merrymaking is over. Winter weather has set in on us, to one degree or another. Now is the moment when the reality factor also begins to strike many of us. Papers to be written, reading to be finished(or perhaps started). On the other side there are papers to be graded and perhaps a manuscript to be readied for a journal. Meanwhile downtown and in firms around Route 128 mean and women are scurrying to put the finishing touches on those fall projects. Hence we might sing together this morning, "Work for the night is coming." For many, this is a busy time.

This kind of time has its own kind of grandeur. When you begin to piece together a picture of social conditions in a nineteenth century English mill town for your history paper, you begin to find some sense of accomplishment. Likewise, your friends can sense your excitement when you announce that after all that hard work your experiment is finally working. On the other hand, sometimes your work doesn't work out, at least right away. Then the approaching deadline can cause some discomfort. Sometimes the pieces of the historical picture or the data from the experiment don't fit together. So, probably, you work harder. Busy time becomes busier, and in the process it begins to lose some of its grandeur.

That, it seems to me, is the state of affairs for a cross-section of people at this time of year. Life has some grandeur, some discomfort. That's worrisome and wearisome, perhaps, but it will pass like the proverbial winter cold. But for some, the situation can be considerably more serious. And I want to look at that more serious situation this morning. This is the situation when things move from occasional discomfort to a predicament of some pain.

It can begin when the thesis for the paper or the data for the experiment simply fall apart. Maybe then you receive that very low grade or even the threat, real or imagined, of the termination of your work. You work for the night is coming; and suddenly there is the night. Add to this the sometimes pressing personal problem, and things can be dark indeed. The relationship to your parents which just won't heal. The intimate courtship which just won't last. You may have a gnawing awareness that something is wrong in the way you relate to other people. You may have an illness which keeps coming back again and again. With such personal predicaments your whole self can ache, sometimes through the night.

So busy time can become empty time. A life with some grandeur can become a hollow sequence of events. As we say, revealingly, from time to time: "One damned thing after another." And I have not even mentioned the public problems of our time, which most of us know so

well and which can concern us so deeply.

This past week I attended a colloquium for theologians and conservationists on the theme of man's relationship to the natural world. Not surprisingly, it was held in the horse country of Virginia. It was unbelievably picturesque, the carriage house and the rail fences, the duck pond and the birches. At that colloquium, ironically, we heard some quite disquieting news about air pollution. (It started when one of the participants who came from an urban area said that he was uneasy about the Virginia air. He said he was accustomed to seeing what he breathed.) Seven out of ten Americans live in cities. And almost all of them are breathing toxic air. Sometimes, as in New York and Gary, the air is the equivalent of two packs of cigarettes a day. The colloquium also heard similar reports about water and sound pollution.

On the way back in the plane, I sat across from two young marines who were coming home for a short stay before being shipped to Viet Nam. They told me they had heard that it's hell over there. And that's an incontestable fact, I take it, no matter what you think of the overall war effort. Not just air and water and sound pollution, but human pollution. In Viet Nam it's hell, for everyone anywhere near the fighting. One damned thing after another. Really damned.

The awareness of such public problems can profoundly aggravate academic, vocational, and personal problems. Many today feel drawn into a space which has "NO EXIT," as Jean Paul Sartre suggests. Busy time can become empty time which, in turn, can develop into damned time. The darkness seems to be everywhere and unending. Not for everyone today, to be sure, but for some. We may laugh at damnation as an abstract theological concept, but those who are in it don't laugh.

How are we to react to such a time? What to do? What to say? What to think and feel?

Most people, it would seem, try to grin and bear it. You kill time as best you can. You try to keep busy. You talk about the weather. You watch television. You take tranquilizers. You try, perhaps, to make yourself believe that the darkness isn't all that dark. A few people, however, look for a better world to come at the end of time. This was the faith of ancient Israel, set forth for us in our Lesson by the prophet Isaiah: "Then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.... And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing, with everlasting joy upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."(Is. 35:3-10)

This faith is taken up in the New Testament, as in our Epistle Lesson: "But according to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells."(II Peter 3:13) And it's deeply embedded in the tradition of the church, as in Philipp Nicolai's moving hymn concerning the coming of the Bridegroom to the slumbering Maidens, the parable of our Gospel Lesson today:

Zion hears the watchmen singing,
And all her heart with joy is springing.
She wakes, she rises from her gloom;

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For her Lord comes down all-glorious,
The strong in grace, in truth victorious,
Her star is risen, her Light is come.

In the agony of their darkest times, the people of Israel and the faithful of all ages have looked to God's resplendent Light dawning at the End of time. A time of renewal of nature, when pollution will be no more. A time of renewal of society, when war and the hate behind it will be no more. A time of renewal of persons, when anxiety and tears and sighing will be no more. And that can bring you comfort in even the darkest of times. In the midst of darkness you shut your eyes and in faith you see the dawning of God's final Day of Light.

Interestingly, however, our text gives an added dimension to this inner vision of the glorious End time projected by men and women of faith in times of darkness. Apparently some of those who were in such a predicament became a little impatient. The hope for a time of Light at the End is fine, they probably said, but when is that End time coming? When will that final Light begin to dawn? This is a question which we who are living 2000 years later can appreciate. A hope which never materializes, however glorious, is really no hope and therefore no comfort. To this kind of question the writer of II Peter says: "The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." By that last word I don't think that he means simply some isolated experience of changing your ways. I think he means a thoroughgoing entrance into new life in this world.

Hence I venture to paraphrase his meaning, in part, in this way. The time of darkness is full of grace and comfort. Light is shining through the darkness. But you have yet to see it for you have yet to see that on which the Light reflects itself. The empty time and the damned time is dark precisely because the Light of the End time has yet to find an object to be seen by you.

And I venture to say that that object upon which the glorious Light of the End time shines in this world is -- the human face. I was paging through a book of portraits of Christ by Roualt the other day. I think Roualt paints the light of the glorious End time in the compassionate yet mystical face of Christ. I think also of St. Paul's words: "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."(II Cor. 2:6)

Think, too, of the face of one who identifies himself with Christ. St. Paul is quite exuberant about this: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another."(II Cor. 4:18) The reference is to a congregation of Christian people; not unlike this one, I suspect. According to this imagry, then, the Light of the End time hits the face of Christ in this dark world. He, therefore, is the fullness of time. And christians participate in that Light and in that time -- their faces shine -- by their relationship to him. Which is a long and complicated way around to a very simple suggestion.

When your time becomes empty, and maybe damned, when the night has

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come, then you can try to grin and bear it, killing time as best you can. But there's another possibility: to shut your eyes first of all, and to enter imaginatively into the hope of the faithful of all time in the Light of God's End time, the new heavens and the new earth in which righteousness dwells. But then also to open your eyes to the face of Christ, who is the fullness of time in this world, and to see his Light shining from the face of your fellow Christians, who come to you in times of trouble. Who greet you friendly on Sunday morning; who visit you when you are sick; who talk to you when you are alone. Whose faces show forth the light of Christ.

The Lord is not slow about his coming, as some think of slowness. But he wills to be with you now and to give you comfort, even in the darkest of times. He wills to shower his Light upon you, now as well as at the End of time.