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IThess.4/Mt.25
“Uncommon Sense”

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

When the Bible was written, people believed that the earth was created a few thousand years ago. Today, we know that it is around 13 billion years old.

Now, in theory, the age of the universe doesn't make any difference to us as we consider today's scripture lessons. The “Day of the Lord” mentioned in the lesson from First Thessalonians could come at any moment; it doesn't matter how much time has elapsed from the Creation of the Universe until the ultimate conclusion of history.

Whether we wait for another 13 billion years or for two days--right now, we are still anticipating what church tradition calls, the “Second Coming of Christ”—when Christ returns to earth to issue his “Final Judgment.”

There's a vivid picture of the Second Coming of Christ in the First Lesson, where St. Paul writes, “For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, the Lord will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.”

Now, this is just a *picture* of the return of the Messiah and the final judgment. What's important about the image is not whether it is an accurate description of the end of the world. We can't really have much idea of how that return will take place. Yet while it's highly unlikely that this world will end tomorrow, the importance of Paul's words is to warn us to be ready to serve God now and in the future.

So today's first lesson is useful to those of us Christians who interpret the doctrine of the Second Coming in a *metaphorical* way. The idea behind the belief in the Last Judgement is that we should always be prepared for God to come into our lives.

Another picture of this necessary process of preparation is found in the Second Lesson. There, Jesus tells a parable about bridesmaids waiting for a bridegroom. The idea is that we must be ready, like the bridesmaids, for whatever comes to pass in the future that is ahead of us.

Notice that the bridesmaids in Christ's parable had a role to perform that bridesmaids nowadays don't have. At the time of Jesus, the custom was for bridesmaids to meet the groom at his home. They would then bring him to the wedding celebration.

In Christ's story, the groom was late in getting to his house. (Maybe he was at a bachelor party.) Five of the ten bridesmaids for the wedding had anticipated that they might have a long wait for the groom, so they had wisely obtained extra oil for their lamps. The other five attendants found their lamps running out of oil when the groom arrived in the middle of the night. As a result, they couldn't escort him to the wedding.

The meaning of the parable is fairly straightforward. The bridegroom represents the Messiah. So like bridesmaids greeting the groom, Christians should be ready to meet their Lord.

I am present at a fair number of weddings, and in the course of my attendance, I come across a lot of bridesmaids. The most useful bridesmaids are indeed those who are prepared.

They arrive at the rehearsal on time. They're not distracted by worrying about their appearance. As a result, they're a calm presence and they're able to support the bride during the drama of the wedding.

As I said, the meaning of the parable is straightforward: you should be ready for the challenges that you know you will need to face. You will want to avoid being caught off guard, with no oil in your lamp. That's just common sense.

But it happens that religion often seems *contrary* to common sense. As St. Paul said in an arresting passage, Christians are "fools for Christ's sake."

Paul doesn't mean to claim that we are complete *idiots*! But we may often find ourselves doing things that to the outside world don't seem to have much of a payback.

So, for example, we come to church to worship—as we're doing right now. To the unreligious, this practice might seem like a waste of time. But while we recognize that the payback comes to us unseen by outsiders, it does make sense in our own terms. We might say that we Christians have *uncommon sense*.

Uncommon sense expects the unexpected. Uncommon sense *assumes* that God wants to help us, even when we are faced with apparently overwhelming problems. Uncommon sense takes care to examine what's happening in our lives because we believe that God is always trying to communicate with us in new ways.

I'm currently writing a review of a book about an English theologian who wrote in the 1600's; his name was John Smith. Smith claimed that human beings are able to have what he called, a "*sense of the divine*."

According to this sense of the divine, we can detect God in the world around us as we detect physical objects.

I find that I have a sense of the divine when I read about the results of *scientific research* into the nature of the universe. A lot has happened in all those years of Creation!

A couple of weeks ago, I commented in my blog about a recent scientific discovery where astronomers observed for the first time a collision of neutron stars.

Neutron stars are extremely compact and dense. As a result, when two of them collide and break apart, there is an incredible release of energy. The results of the event in astrophysical terms were as predicted - and scientists couldn't have been more pleased with their observations.

I can't begin to explain what all this means. I know that "dark matter" and "black holes" are at best layperson terms for complex mathematical equations.

Yet as someone who believes in a Creator God, I find these discoveries deeply *satisfying*. While the universe might just have "happened" to exist, I can't believe that. I can't believe that the Universe appeared by chance.

Rather, the vast realm of Creation gives me a sense of the divine power beyond the world as we know it. As the Bible says, "The heavens declare the glory of God..."

That is, the heavens declare God's glory to those who are ready—to those who try to detect the works of our Creator.

Amen.