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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, November 14, 2021
25th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 33/Proper 28/Year B

First Reading: Daniel 12:1-3

Second Reading: Hebrews 10:11-14 [15-18] 19-25

Gospel Reading: Mark 13:1-8

Sermon Title: "Warnings of Things to Come"

Theme

In the last week of his life, Jesus warned his disciples concerning trials that were to come upon them and upon the world. He exhorts the listener: Do not be alarmed.

Text

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" ²Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

³When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished? ⁵Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁶Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. ⁷When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. ⁸For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

Sermon

The Temple that Jesus and the Disciples were in and are exiting but yet observing in the story was started by Herod the Great in around 19 BCE and was still under construction when this story took place.

Herod the Great was ethnically a Jew but was more than likely pagan as were most Romans. The Roman idea of control over their subjects was to allow limited autonomy and so they allowed a Jew to rule over Palestine, but let's face it, he was a puppet of the Roman Empire.

Herod wanted his kingdom to shine and so he promoted the rebuilding of the Temple because he knew it would draw people from around the known world. Case in point, it's the Festival of the Passover, and Jews from all over the known world have made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship, make the sacrifice, and bring offerings to the Temple. The Temple was good for business.

And without a doubt, the Temple was the largest, most extravagant building Jesus and his Disciples have ever seen with their own eyes. It was huge! In verse 1 the Disciples comment on the size of the stones used in the building. Some of the stones used in the complex are as large as 37' x 18' x 12'. It is hard for me to imagine quarrying, squaring, transporting, and lifting blocks of that size into place today let alone 2000 years ago!

The large blocks that form the Western Wall are all that remains of Herod's Temple today. We know that wall as the Wailing Wall and it is a place of great devotion for many Jews today.

While the Temple was no doubt impressive, Jesus said, ²"Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

This was alarming and so four of the Disciples pulled Jesus aside a few moments later and asked him for more information. "When is this going to happen? What are the signs we should look for?"

But rather than answer their question clearly, Jesus simply said, and I paraphrase, "You are focused on the wrong things. Don't worry about this building and what it stands for."

Now, before I go any further, I need to remind you that we are at the beginning of Chapter 13 of Mark's Gospel. By the end of Chapter 14, Jesus has been betrayed and awaits his hearing before the Sanhedrin on the grounds of this same Temple. So his answers to the questions of his Disciples were undoubtedly influenced by what will happen in perhaps as little as 48 hours.

His answers came in the form of warnings: "Beware that you do not go astray. Many will come along claiming to be the messiah, claiming "I am he." Others may come in my name. Do not allow yourselves to be led astray." The truth is that there were many before him and they keep coming even in our present day.

Jesus said we are not to try to know the future. It is enough to be faithful and ready to give your testimony. Jesus went on to say that along with the pretenders who will come along, there will be other events, both natural and human-made, that people will portend are signs that the end is about to come. Don't be taken in by them, they are not the end but just the beginning of the birth pangs. And that is where our lection for today ends.

I think it ends rather abruptly; awkwardly. Jesus went on for the rest of Chapter 13 with all kinds of scary words. But allow me to guide you in some thinking about where this reading ends – with birth pangs.

Acknowledging that I am a man and know very little about birthing babies, let alone the pain of birthing babies, I believe that the birth pangs Jesus spoke of are the result of a fully natural delivery; pre-C-section, or use of pain killers, or spinal blocks, etc., I am quite sure they are terrible, and in the 1st Century, a woman had no option but to endure the pangs to get to the joy of motherhood on the other side. It's Jesus' metaphor so let's go with it for a moment.

Jesus is saying there will be pain, hardship, terrible suffering, but it is necessary, to get to the joy that awaits us on the other side.

Jesus' Disciples, who really would have really liked more information, will indeed suffer. Many of them will become martyrs and die excruciating deaths. I can understand their concern. However, they also were firsthand witnesses to the Resurrection. And if there is one thing about their lives that I envy, it is that they knew the joy of the Resurrection first hand.

All we can do is believe in the Resurrection by faith. Imagine what it must have been like to *know by witnessing* the Resurrection. Imagine being one of the eleven remaining Disciples who can claim, "I am a faithful follower of one who has the power over death and who rules the universe from heaven and promises to take me with him when my days are done." Those Disciples knew the power of that experience and it was enough to see them through whatever came their way. I can imagine them saying to the world, "Go ahead take your best shot. The Lord has already *given me more* than you can ever *take from me*. Bring it on, for to lose is to win, to die is to live. So bring it on."

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

I entitled this sermon, "Warnings of Things to Come" because in the reading the Disciples wanted signs but Jesus gave them much more. He said horrible things will happen but they need not worry about those things. Just be faithful and they will be fine. That exhortation is good for us too.

It is very unlikely that we will ever experience the persecutions that the first several generations of Christians met. But maybe we face an even greater, more insidious danger. Our relative wealth; our ability to overcome; our tolerance; our society's lack of clearly defined values; apathy in general. All these seem to give people plenty of opportunities to *do it if it feels good*. But that kind of attitude might just be worse than a clear and present danger, an enemy who is easy to see and identify.

Make no mistake, Jesus' warnings are still appropriate for us. We need to stay focused on the main thing, and the main thing is our relationship to God revealed in Jesus Christ. If we do that, we will be fine.

We are rapidly approaching another liturgical year-end. Advent begins in only a couple of weeks; a season when we don't turn our attention to the historical events of the nativity as much as we turn our attention to Jesus' promise to return. We need not worry about warnings of things to come. We only need to be faithful to him who will see us through to the new thing that awaits us on the other side.

Prayer

Lord God, you alone are faithful. Send us your Holy Spirit to lift us up when we falter, strengthen our faith so that we may withstand whatever may come our way. And when the end of this age comes, remember us and take us to yourself that we might live eternally with you and the Holy Spirit, and our Lord Jesus Christ. We pray this in his name. Amen.