

SERMON  
Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 33  
November 15, 2009

Daniel 12:1-3  
Psalm 16  
Hebrews 10:11-14 [15-18] 19-25  
Mark 13:1-8

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

The year was 1976. I was a junior in High School and played alto saxophone in the High School Band. We had been invited to travel to Philadelphia and Washington D.C. to perform as we celebrated our nation's bicentennial. We played concerts at places such as the Liberty Bell, the Lincoln Memorial, and the south park of the White House called the Ellipse. I even got to shake the hand of President Gerald Ford.

It was an exciting time for me. It was the first time I had been away from home for an extended period of time. I had my Kodak Instamatic Pocket 20. Remember those? There was the Instamatic Pocket 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, and 60. I had the 20. It had a mechanical shutter with a speed of 1/100 of a second, or 1/40 of a second when using a "magicube" flash. But the distinguishing factor of the Instamatic Pocket 20 was its plastic red colored shutter release button.

And I used it to take pictures of all of the grand structures that occupied the landscape of Washington D.C. I took pictures of the White House, the Capital Building, the Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln monuments, all made of gleaming white stone. It's easy to think that those massive structures will be there forever. But we all know that that will not be the case.

It's difficult to imagine, but somewhere, someday, the pages of history will turn and in all likelihood, the capital will go the way of all earthly powers. For kingdoms will rise and fall, but only the kingdom of God is forever.

It's also difficult to imagine what circumstances would lead to a failure of our national identity. What new power might rule? Will it all end with a bang – or a whimper? A 233 year history of our nation is impressive in the modern world, but in the course of history, it is a blink of the eye. What catastrophe would bring this nation to an end?

Now if all of this talk of national failure is unsettling – Jesus words to his disciples were near catastrophic.

As they were leaving the temple compound, one of the disciples marveled at the magnificence of the Temple. It was the second temple – the temple Herod the Great had rebuilt. It was of such magnitude that it took up one sixth of the city of Jerusalem. The temple courtyard was the size of about six football fields put together.

Huge stones as large as 10x40x20 feet were used to provide a foundation for the platform of this area where the land dropped off sharply. The southeast corner of the temple platform rose two hundred feet above the floor of the Kidron valley.

The exterior was covered in white marble and gold. One can only imagine the reaction of pilgrims upon first seeing it – especially if they arrived in the morning with the early sunlight striking the front façade. This shining structure would have seemed a fitting place indeed for God's presence on earth. "What massive stones! What enormous buildings!" exclaimed one of the disciples.

Jesus' response however borders on blasphemy. His words strike at the heart of Jewish national identity and the religion of his ancestors. For this temple was the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It was the center of everything Jewish.

And this upstart young teacher from some podunk little town has the audacity to say: "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

The words are almost unspeakable! We can measure the stunned reaction of the disciples by the fact that they did not say anything until they had left the temple area and had gone to sit down on a ridge on the Mount of Olives which overlooks the temple complex.

Finally, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked Jesus privately; “When will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished? What can we expect?”

When we woke up this morning, many of us stepped into a world of expectations. Like a script in a play, everything is choreographed. When our clock reached a certain time, the alarm went off. When we walked into the bathroom and flipped a switch, a light came on. When we turned on the faucet, hot water began to spill out. When we got into our car and turned the key, the car’s engine started.

So many things in life we just take for granted until something doesn’t work. The alarm doesn’t go off, the light doesn’t come on, the water doesn’t get hot, the car doesn’t start. We panic for a minute. We get frustrated. And then we think, “This is not how my day is supposed to be. Somebody or something changed the script.

The fact is that most of our world plays out a very different script. A minor power outage is a non-event. Outside of our country or outside of our neighborhood there are problems and concerns many of us can’t even begin to comprehend. There are illnesses that can’t be treated, people dying in need of food, catastrophic natural disasters, wars and conflict, political and civil unrest, and overt exploitation and abuse of humanity and nature.

As we read about these things on the front pages of the tabloids while waiting in the grocery store check-out line, we interpret these events as “signs of the times.” We think; this must be the end of history. The book is about to close.

Of course throughout history people have made predictions that were later proven to be false. Let me share with you some of the more famous ones:

- Frank Know, U.S. Secretary of the Navy, on December 4, 1941 said this; “Whatever happens, the U.S. Navy is not going to be caught napping.”
- Economist Irving Fisher on October 16, 1929 said the following; “Stocks have reached what looks like a permanently high plateau.”
- Thomas Watson, IBM chairman in 1943 stated; “I think there is a world market for maybe five computers.”
- And Decca Record Company, after rejecting a request for a recording contract with a group called the Beatles in 1962 said; “We don’t like their sound. Groups of guitars are on the way out.”

In regards to our story this morning, I think that if Jesus would have wanted his disciples to know the exact date and time, he would have told them. Instead he sets out some clues – a few signposts along the way. Signs that will keep the disciples’ vision clear and their hearts focused on how he is continually coming into the lives of those he came to save.

You see, Jesus knew how difficult it was going to be for his disciples. “Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many.” For false messiahs and false preachers will be the order of the day at the end of the days. Many have come along in our lifetime deceiving people with their speculations and predictions.

Just tune into any religious channel on television and hear the rantings of those who think they have broken the code, figured out the great mystery. The theologian Fred Craddock once said; “Maybe people are obsessed with the second coming of Jesus, because deep down, they were really disappointed in the first one.”

Think about that for a moment. “Maybe people are obsessed with the second coming of Jesus, because deep down, they were really disappointed in the first one.”

What’s more, history itself teaches us that when times are bad, talk about the end of time thrives. But when things are going good, we don’t hear so much about it. And this makes perfect sense. How quickly one wishes to “check out” depends a lot on how happily one is “checked in.”

So where does this leave us? Are we, too, like the disciples, still wanting to know when these things will happen? I think that if we are really honest with ourselves, we probably would rather not know. For we live in the “already – not yet” times.

Indeed, Jesus has already come into the world. Remember, the “first coming” a couple of thousand years ago. And personally, that’s good enough for me. That’s all I can handle at this point in my life. I’m still trying to figure out what his first coming means let alone worrying about a second coming. So I am content living in the “in-between” times.

But with that being said, the story is not yet complete. God’s saving act is not done yet. Sin, evil, and suffering are still very much a part of the world we live in. And we are still actors in the script.

For we have been called to be a part of God’s saving work in the world. We are to reflect the new tag line for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America which reads, “God’s work. Our hands.”

Jesus concludes this section by saying; “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” After talking about false prophets, wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines, Jesus tells the disciples not to be alarmed and compares what will happen to a woman in labor.

What Jesus is saying here is that we must not despair when we see these things happening. For we can still have hope even when hope seems so distant.

We read in our newspapers daily about places that seem devoid of hope. We see it on television. We see faces of bewildered children caught in deplorable circumstances. Every day we hear stories about places where violence tears apart people’s lives and shatters families, communities, and nations.

We know of people whose lives have been torn apart by addictions, family violence, job loss or illness. It's so easy to retreat into despair feeling like God has abandoned us, and just wait for some future salvation.

But Jesus says; these things are not the start of the road to death, but the pains of birth. Jesus portrays these signs as a path toward new life and eternal joy. An expectant mother recognizes that her labor pains ultimately bring joy and new life. So too, the wars and disasters are the painful contractions of the new creation being born.

The sharper and more intense the pain, the closer the time of delivery. That is how a disciple of Jesus can have hope even in the midst of suffering. For Jesus has given us to see beyond the pain, beyond the killing, the earthquake, the famine, to the coming Kingdom of God that has already come in part, continues to come each and every day, and will someday come in its fullness.

You see, salvation is our past, present and future. Salvation is our past in that God became human in the form of Jesus. Salvation is our present in that God's Holy Spirit guides us along the pathways of life. Salvation is our future in that Jesus has promised to come again to rule in God's Kingdom forever and ever.

When temples have toppled, when wars have run their course, when the earth has shook one last time, when famines have devastated the people, when kings and rulers have had their day, the Lord, the Messiah, the Prince of Peace, the Christ, will have his day.

And in that day, those who have persevered, those who have suffered patiently, those who have kept the faith, will receive the crown of eternal life. That is the hope we have in Jesus Christ. That is the hope that will see us through to the end. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.