

Malachi 3:13-4:2a, 5-6
Psalm 98
2nd Thessalonians 3:6-13
LUKE 21:5-19

Sermon – November 18, 2007

“Sing to LORD a new song,
for he has done marvelous things” Psalm 98:1

“As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” Luke 21:6

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

So what was it that the crowd saw that Jesus predicted would be thrown down?

Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, in *The Jewish War* described the Temple in this way:

The sacred edifice itself, the holy Temple, in the central position, was approached by a flight of twelve steps. The façade was equal height and breadth, each being a hundred cubits (a *cubit* is the length of the arm from the fingertips to the elbow, around 18 inches); but the building was narrower by forty cubits, for in front it had as it were shoulders extending twenty cubits on either side. The first gate was seventy cubits high and twenty-five cubits broad and had no doors, displaying unexcluded the void expanse of heaven; the entire face was covered with gold, and through it the first edifice was visible to a spectator without in all its grandeur and the surroundings of the inner gate all gleaming with gold fell beneath his eye. ...

“The exterior of the building wanted nothing that could astound either mind or eye. For, being covered on all sides with massive plates of gold, the sun was not sooner up than it radiated so fiery a flash the persons straining to look at it were compelled to avert their eyes, as from the solar rays.” (5:207-208)

O.K., so the Temple was a pretty impressive building; but by St. Barnabas’ standards, its budget was tiny. Right? I have seen an estimate that with craft-workers, animal traders, the priestly hierarchy and all others needed to run it; there were close to 20,000 “Temple personnel” either full or part time. Most of the people who lived in Jerusalem were either directly or indirectly dependent on the Temple for their living.

What Jesus is predicting is not that a beautiful building will be destroyed, not even that a magnificent building will be destroyed. Those who heard him knew immediately that he was predicting that life as they knew it would be destroyed—their religious life, their economic life, their national life and identity. If that building were gone, then all of these and more would be gone as well.

The destruction of the Temple would be infinitely worse than 9/11.

As Jesus spoke these things, he was not on the Mount of Olives speaking privately to his disciples. He was just outside the Temple, one of the most public places in Jerusalem. He was proclaiming the coming destruction of the Temple and their way of life to the masses on Times Square.

Of course, someone pipes up and asks “when will this be, and what will be the sign that this about to take place?” (Luke 21:7) There is a control freak in all of us, and every crowd or group has one that is more determined than everyone else. This one spoke up. Maybe if I know when it is going to be, maybe if I know the sign that is about to happen, I can be prepared. I can avoid the disaster. Maybe, maybe, maybe, I can be in control if I only know the secret.

Jesus responds to this question by describing three sets of conditions that some might consider possible predictors.

1. There will be an abundance of false teachers and prophets claiming to be him. That is, there will be many who come saying that I am Jesus returned, and the end is at hand. Jesus’ advice concerning them is very simple. Do not be fooled. Ignore them.
2. Then Jesus says that there will be great social, political and natural disasters. There will be wars of all kinds and sizes; there will be revolutions; there will be genocides; there will all types of horrible things that people and nations will do to each other. There will be all kinds of natural disasters: earthquake, famines, diseases and strange and terrifying things in the heavens. But he says that none of these will be the predictors. They will not tell you when the end of life as we know it will be. Along with this admonition he is also telling us to ignore anyone who tries to use any of these to predict when it will be.
3. He says that there will be great persecution of believers. Some will say that you do not believe correctly or behave according to their standards, and they will have you thrown out of the church. Some will have you imprisoned, sent into exile or even killed. And those who betray you will include your friends and families--those whom you love and trust. Jesus says not even suffering and treachery of this order will predict the end.

We will not know. We will not be in control.

Assuming that they know when the end is coming, individuals and groups have done all sorts of strange and terrible things.

In Paul’s time, there were those in his fledgling church that he had founded in Thessalonica who were so sure that they knew the time and that it was soon. Therefore, they had no need to work. They could just wait. After all, the end is near. Paul said that the church was to have nothing to do with them.

And please note that Jesus says nothing of that made up, non-biblical, fantasy that is so current in our day of a “rapture” in which “the believers”, “the saved” will be taken out of their places, out of this world to escape the suffering and persecutions. The followers of Jesus are not to be safely high in the heavens looking smugly and self-righteously down on all of the “sinners” while they escape all of the pain, loss, terror and persecution. Jesus says that his followers are to be right here on earth in midst of everyone and everything. They are to experience everything just as everyone else does, and they are to live through it just as everyone else does.

So what are they and we to do as we wait in this time before the end? Jesus’ instructions are just as clear: “This will give you an opportunity to testify”. (Luke 21:13) In the midst of pain and

suffering and at the risk of ridicule and persecution, we are to witness. Our task and our situation today are no different than they were for the faithful followers of Jesus nearly two thousand years ago. We gather that we may testify.

We gather as members to give our pledges for the coming year not just so that a familiar and comfortable organization and building can be kept open and operating. We give our pledges so that as the gathered body of Christ we will have the resources to form and train disciples. We give our pledges so that as the members of the gathered body of Christ we may be fed and strengthened to witness and minister as we go into the worlds of family, work, community and nation. We give our pledges so that as the members of the gathered body of Christ we may have a place to study, discuss, imagine and exchange ideas so that our witness may be vital, lively and important to others and to our world for Christ's sake. This is our time to testify.

Part of our testimony is to give thanks. Each Sunday that we gather we give thanks. Each day of our life should be a day of thanksgiving. As the "General Thanksgiving" from Evening Prayer says it, "we your unworthy servants give you humble thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all whom you have made. We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace and for the hope of glory." (*BCP* 125)

Each Sunday that we gather we give thanks. We make Eucharist. At the point in all of the prayers of consecration that we pray to God to send down the Holy Spirit to sanctify, there is a three-part consecration in all but Prayer C. For me, the acclamation of the community and the calling for the consecrating Holy Spirit are most powerfully expressed in Prayer D:

We praise you, we bless you,
we give thanks to you,
and we pray to you, Lord our God.

Lord, we pray that in your goodness and mercy your Holy Spirit may descend upon us, and upon these gifts, sanctifying them and showing them to be holy gifts for your holy people, the bread of life and the cup of salvation, the Body and Blood of your Son Jesus Christ.

Grant that all who share this bread and cup may become one body and on spirit, a living sacrifice in Christ, to the praise of your Name. (*BCP* 375)

Have you ever just stopped and let those words sink in? Have you ever stopped to really understand what we as the gathered body of Christ are praying in these words? We are asking God to send the Holy Spirit upon *us* that we may be sanctified to be holy gifts—a living sacrifice in Christ, to the praise of God.

Our thanksgiving today and Thursday is not just a casual thanksgiving that comes lightly tripping off of our tongues before we again turn to our own interests and ourselves. Our thanksgiving is called from a deeper place—a place touched by God in Jesus, the Christ. Our thanksgiving is an offering and a witness to our Lord.

Amen.

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