

Sunday November 17th, 2019
23rd Sunday after Pentecost

PRAYER: O Lord, the earth is reeling, the foundations of the mountains tremble and quake; we stumble in shadows over the shaking ground, looking neither left nor right. We are blind to the great light, and we are blind to those on whom the light has shone—the weak and the forsaken, the afflicted and the tormented, the powerless and the poor.

Restore our sight, Lord. Lead us out of the shadows of indifference into the glory of faithfulness, that one day the world might reel from rejoicing; that one day the foundations of the earth might tremble beneath the pounding of dancing feet.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION: God of consuming fire, treat us not as stubble on the field because of the folly of our misdeeds. We are misled by arrogance as we boast of our goodness. We look with disdain on those less fortunate, and ignore the poverty of our own souls. Claiming to be among the mighty, we favour those gifted with similar strengths. As individuals and as a nation, we test your patience. Yet in Christ you still love us still. Forgive our pride and restore our sanity, so that we may yet serve you.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: Brothers and sisters, it is God who gives justice to the weak and maintains the right of the afflicted and destitute. God rescues the needy and delivers them from the hand of the wicked. As you confess your sins, God is faithful and just and will through Christ deliver you blameless in the day of God’s judgment. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

STEWARDSHIP: God is the Redeemer of nations, and great and wonderful are his works. All that we bring God has provided and only by God’s grace is our act of offering worthy of praise. Let us now present our tithes and offerings as our tribute and thanksgiving for God’s benevolent care, and may he multiply our efforts to his everlasting glory. For we offer our gifts in the name of Jesus Christ, the obedient one.

PASTORAL PRAYER: O God of heaven and earth, your prophets and apostles teach us to anticipate “the day of the Lord”—a time when wrong will be righted and the righteous honoured, when violence will be rejected and peacemakers acclaimed, when injustice will be outlawed and the just praised, when guilt will be acknowledged and the innocent acquitted. We give thanks that you are our God, for only a God like you can breathe hope into our life and grant meaning to our existence.

Enable us, O Lord, when we think of your day, to remember the character of the One whose day it is. Help us to put the emphasis where it belongs: not on the fact you will be our judge but, on the fact, you are our judge; not on your power to wound us in the future but on our power to wound you now. Let us not forget that the Lord whom we shall meet on your day is no other than the One we have met in Jesus Christ our Lord, in whom you have warned us of the evils you deplore and alerted us to the virtues you uphold.

O God, you warn us not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought, but we honour ourselves before our neighbours. You warn us not to return evil for evil, but we seek an eye for an eye. You warn us that your gospel can turn friends into enemies, but we are anxious if all do not speak well of us. Yes, Lord, you warn us of the evils you deplore, but we do not shun them. Sadder but wiser, we pray for another chance.

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We also fail to embrace the virtues to which you alert us. You appeal to us to grant justice to the weak, but we continue to concede privilege to the strong. You appeal to us to show partiality to the orphan, the widow and the stranger to our land, but we question our responsibility to atone for the inequity that we know exists. You appeal to us to maintain the rights of the afflicted, but we regard their defense as a charity case. You appeal to us to rescue the needy, but we stand idly by while their numbers multiply. Yes, Lord, you call us to the virtues you uphold, but we do not embrace them. Sadder but wiser, we pray for another chance.

Forgive us, O God, for our insensitivity to your warnings and appeals and, even more, to the agony of those in whose behalf you utter them. Bestow on us the gifts of your Holy Spirit, that we might become agents of your will, taking your warnings to heart and heeding your appeals. As we go forth in your name, grant us the faith that moves people, the hope that builds community, and the love that creates family.

BENEDICTION: May God give you wisdom that no adversary will be able to refute. May God give you power that no adversary will be able to resist. And may God give you compassion that no adversary will be able to refuse. Amen.

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Luke 21:5-19
“What’s Your Sign?”

Unless you have not been paying attention, it must be clear to you all how much I enjoy my time with the children every Sunday during our story time. Like many of you, I wait with baited breath to hear what might come out of a little one’s mouth. I think it is safe to say that we all recognize the importance of children. They are, after all, our future, and a blessing from God. Children can also see things in ways we never considered before. Take the following example.

A Sunday school teacher asked her lively class of seven-year-olds the following question. “How many of you want to go to heaven?” They all raised their hands, except one little girl. After class, the teacher took her aside and asked her, “Why didn’t you raise your hand?” She replied, “I want to go to heaven, but my mother said I have to go straight home after Sunday school.”

We feel compelled to snicker at the naivety of this young girl. However, imagine hearing all about the delights of heaven, and hearing an invitation to go there, only to find out that it will happen sometime in the future. In this young girls’ heart there must have been some disappointment that her obedience to her mother was going to cost her, a trip to heaven. It sounded so great to her young ears. Who wouldn’t want to go?

I imagine her experience was something akin to driving in a car with a friend, and after several hours on the road our friend begins to talk about this great restaurant he knows. He describes in great detail the magnificent food, the terrific service, and the low price. He points out that this restaurant is world famous, and draws people from all over the country. As you listen your taste buds begin to tingle, your stomach begins growling, and you can imagine the smell of the food.

Then in a happy circumstance, not far down the road, your friend informs you, is this famous restaurant. How exciting, you think. It’s not long now before we stop and I can enjoy this world-famous restaurant. Every kilometer is sheer torture as you anxiously await the neon sign to this food providing extravaganza. Then it is mere meters to the entrance off the highway. You can hardly sit still. Then your friend casually points out the restaurant and drives by saying, “We should try it some time.”

If ever there was a clear-cut excuse for road rage this might be it. How disappointing! How cruel, even! How can someone build something up, only to indicate we have to wait? How long must we wait? How many more sleeps until it happens, as we like to say to our young children? The gospel lesson before us can cause that same frustration of making us wait. We read it, and we understand there are predictions here, but when will it happen. It is the same question the disciples asked.

As good Christian people we know the end is coming, we know Jesus predicted it, but we want to know when. What’s the time frame? We all want to be prepared.

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As we were warned in Matthew 25, in the story of the ten virgins, we want our lamps filled with oil and ready to receive Jesus. As a point of interest, the study and focus on the end times, and return of Christ, is called in Christian circles, eschatology. It is a big Greek word that simply means the study of the end of things. Christians have been interested in this subject since the days of Jesus and even well back into the Old Testament. In the Old Testament the end of things is often called “The Day of the Lord.” It refers, among many things, to a time of judgment upon the world.

This interest and desire to anticipate the end of things and return of Jesus has led to some rather twisted theology and biblical exposition. So, over the years we have Hal Lindsay’s book, “the Late Great Planet Earth”. His very poor scholarship is based on a very old and misdirected theology called dispensationalism. The idea being that there are certain dispensations or eras that when completed will signaled the end of times.

Similarly, are the very popular fantasy books called, the “left Behind Series”. I mean, if you enjoy the books as fiction go for it but please do not treat them as literal truth. As a young teen I remember being dragged to our church’s lower hall one night to see a movie called “A Distant Thunder” that speculated about what happened if you did not accept Jesus and were left behind. I had nightmares for weeks after that.

Throughout mankind’s history since Jesus was born, every major tragedy, political standoff, or stellar phenomena were seen as portents of the end. This was true of both world war, the emergence of communism, the number of popes elected. You name it, and someone has a theory about the eschatology of these events.

Even today, you can go into any book store, Christian or even secular, and find several books on the subject. Many people, some even in this room, can’t help but see terrible things in the world as signs that the end is near. I have discovered this is even more so as a person ages. I heard one senior tell me that as he got older, he was always thinking of the hereafter. He would go into a room and wonder, “What was I here after”?

So, it is not surprising that we take this passage from Luke and others like it, and try to apply the prophecies of Jesus to current events. We might say things like, “Here it comes! The time is upon us! Get ready!”

I have a very funny comic in one of my books that shows a book table full of books about the end times. Then there is a sign over it which reads, “Should the rapture occur, these books will be half price.” And so, on it goes. We speculate, postulate, write about, sing about, and wonder about the end of this current reality. This despite Jesus’ warning in verse eight of the passage we read today.

“Don’t let anyone mislead you. For many will come in my name, claiming to be the Messiah and saying, ‘The time has come!’ But don’t believe them.” However, there is even a much more serious problem with anyone, scholar or not, using this passage as a blueprint for the end times. That’s because this passage is actually not about an ending, but it is about a beginning.

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Luke 21:32 reads, "I assure you; this generation will not pass from the scene until all these events have taken place."

Let me suggest that it would better if our gospel lesson be described as a passage about a birth. Yes, I said "birth". I don't think I am going too far out on a limb to say that giving birth is painful, even with modern epidurals. Am I right ladies? In fact, you might be surprised to learn that one major part of the curse upon mankind that occurs in Genesis 3:16; because of mankind's fall from grace is "Then he said to the woman, 'You will bear children with intense pain and suffering.'" Thanks a lot Adam and Eve.

What we have in Luke 21 is a birth being described. Look at all the pain and suffering described here. Whatever is coming is going to plunge the world into chaos. Just like when a new baby comes into our families turning our lives upside down. In the passage, the symbols of the current faith of the disciples, namely the temple, are going to be destroyed. Families are also going to be torn apart. Nations will rise up against nations. Believers will be dragged in front of authorities and jailed because of allegiance to Jesus.

It sounds like awful, messy, painful stuff. It is a birthing. The Apostle Paul picks up the same theme in Romans 8:22. "For we know that all creation has been groaning as in pains of childbirth right up to the present time." On top of this being a birthing process, we know that front and center in the midst of it, are the disciples. After all, they were the ones that prompted this whole passage.

The setting for the gospel passage occurs when they were admiring the temple and the decorations on the walls. Like tourists, they pointed out significant attributes of the great building. Jesus then declares that a time was coming when not even one stone would stand on another. The center of faith, the Temple of Jerusalem, its days were numbered. The symbol of Jewish faith was about to be leveled.

This was devastating news to the disciples. They believed it was the end of the Jewish faith; their faith. It was the end of Jewish identity. The news certainly shook them to their core. So upsetting was the news that any rational person would want to know, when this was to happen, so you could prepare. But how does one prepare for the end of everything you have cherished and believed in?

"Don't panic!" Jesus says. It will be rough. It will be a struggle. You will be frightened and probably confused, but don't panic. Don't forsake your faith, because, like in all successful births, something wonderful is coming. There is a new life, a new entity. And the disciples will be at the very forefront of delivering this new life. Which, is why, they will be persecuted.

People, who see only the pain of the birthing process, but refuse to see new life arriving, will go to war against it. They will panic and blame all manner of calamity on its arrival. What an awful mess, just like a birth. Some people will even wish they had never been born. But out of that mess, will come, the first cries of new life. And as that new life takes its first breaths, the pain and struggle will be replaced by joy and hope.

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So, now I wonder if you have noticed something. I have yet to identify who, or what, this new thing is that Jesus talks about. What is this thing that tosses the entire world into turmoil, causing families to be torn apart, nations to rise against nations, and persecution on a grand scale? What is it? Can you guess? I'll give you a clue. When did the disciples first face persecution?

For the first four chapters of the Book of Acts we see little opposition. Instead we read of the Apostles preaching, teaching, and healing in Jesus name. Then in Acts 4:32 we read, "All the believers were of one heart and mind." All except Ananias and Saphira, who lied to the Holy Spirit and died because of it. Acts 5 Verse 11 reads, "Great fear gripped the entire church and all others who heard what had happened."

There is a something new here and in Acts 5:17 the persecution begins. The labour pains have arrived. So, what is being birthed? It is the church, of course; the body of Christ. The arrival of the church casts the whole of the Roman Empire into chaos. Such has always been the nature of the church. Wherever the church reaches, it challenges the status quo. It knocks down walls that divide. The church shines the light of truth on dark superstitions. And often people and authorities don't like it.

What might surprise you is that this birthing of the church is still ongoing. So, it shouldn't be surprising that even today Christians are challenged, persecuted, and betrayed by family members. Time and time again we are called on to defend our faith. It's tough. Sometimes it would be far easier to just walk away.

However, that would be as ridiculous as a woman about to deliver a child saying, "I've changed my mind". The point being made here is that you can't change your mind. If you are one of Christ's disciples you are right in the thick of this birthing. You can't dismiss the struggle by thinking it is only a stepping stone to some anticipated future. It is cruel to the world to describe Christ's love, only to offer nothing of the substance of that love, except for a promised reward after the person dies.

The birth of the church happened just as Jesus said it would on Pentecost. The struggles that came with that birth also arrived as Jesus said it would, when he declared in Luke 21:32, "I assure you, this generation will not pass from the scene until all these events have taken place." The Kingdom of God is already here, gaining ground in the hearts and lives of people all over the globe.

Our faith and our mission are not solely focused on the future glory but need to be settled on the here and now. There are men and women just like Zacchaeus who long to hear not about what is coming but long to hear, "Salvation has come to this home today." Its is like Jesus's wonderful parable of the wheat and the tares. Like the servants in the parable we see the tares representing all that is wrong with this world.

And we ask the Lord, should we rip it out. Should we condemn the tares. Tony Campolo, talks about visiting a parishioner one very hot Sunday afternoon. It was back in the day when few people had air-conditioning but this dear saint was blessed to have it.

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She invited Tony to sit in an exquisite lounge chair while she finished supper preparations. She pushed a button and the chair began to vibrate, creating a soothing sensation. As Tony sat there, he could smell the roasting chicken, and he sat watching Philadelphia Phillies trying to win the pennant. From the kitchen this dear soul carried on a long monologue about how we were living in the last days.

Tony asked her why she felt that way. She went on and talked about how Christians were suffering, and that suffering was all she needed as evidence. It was hard to grasp this point when sitting in a vibrating easy chair, watching a baseball game and anticipating a roast chicken dinner. Tony say they he thought, "If this is suffering...bring it on!" (Let me Tell you a Story, p.200)

If we look for the tares, we will see the tares. If we look for the bad omens, we will see the bad omen. But can we see the wheat. See the good things God is doing, in our midst. Sure, there are labour pains, but there is also new life. And we are called to be a part of this new life, bringing: hope, peace, and justice to those strangled by the tares. So, I wonder. When we look at this world, can we see the wheat?

Can we see the hope? If you think your only hope is after you die I have news for you. If you want to go to heaven, guess what? In Christ, heaven has already come to you.