

Luke 21:5-36

November 13, 2016

It's been a week where many people have been shaking their heads in disbelief on both sides of the border. When I started to look at the lessons for today, I cringed a little bit. What am I going to preach on? The Old Testament lesson from Malachi speaks about the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord, the day when fire shall come and set the wicked ablaze. No, maybe not that one. The Gospel reading is usually a safe bet. I'll preach on the words of Jesus from Luke 21. It was about then that I realized that we either need to ask the Americans to move their scheduled election day to some other time of the year, or we need to change the church lectionary, the planned schedule of readings for the church year.

With the season of Advent starting in two weeks, the lessons for this week and next week draw our eyes and our hearts to the return of the Messiah and the end of the world. So now, this past week there is a new president-elect south of the border and everyone seems convinced that it is either the return of the Messiah or the end of the world. Since we started using the PowerPoint display for our Sunday services, we got a subscription to a website that provides artwork and pictures that are designed to go along with the Bible readings and help us focus on the Word of God for today. It works like this: you put in a Bible verse and it gives you pictures to choose from. It can be really handy sometimes, especially when you are trying to focus the message down to a main point and theme.

When I started working on today's sermon I put Luke 21:5 into the search bar and here's what I got back: -one of them had the title "Signs of the End". Another one read "The Beginning of the End". There were a few more, but the predominant theme centered around "The Sky is Falling" or something like that. One way or another they all pictured war and fire and devastation, mushroom clouds and scorched earth. This isn't looking very good. Suddenly, there in the midst of all the gloom and despair, there was one that caught my eye and calmed my fears. There was this little light of hope shining forth. It's the one that you see projected this morning, "God is Near".

So, here's my question: what message do we need to hear today? What message does the world need to hear today? Gloom and despair, worry and trouble, or something else? Think back to a couple of weeks ago. What was that rousing song we sang so confidently on the eve of the Reformation? "A mighty fortress is our God, a trusty shield and weapon. We tremble not, we fear no ill, they shall not overpower us." As God's children we profess to live in the confidence that God is in control. We believe that He will guide history in the interest of His kingdom. We believe that He will keep us in His care, even in the midst of the storms of life. And we believe that He will ultimately lead us home to glory.

That song of faith and confidence rang out just two weeks ago. That didn't last very long, did it? The trembling is back. The fear is back. The news and social media are filled with gloom and despair. Why is it that we are so affected by the storms of life? Has God left the building? Have we been abandoned? Are we really on our own after all? When everything is calm and smooth sailing, we live in confidence and give thanks for a peaceful heart. But then, when the storms of life come, it seems as if every flash of lightning, every rumble of thunder, and every strong wind that blows disquiets us and robs us of peace. More and more we live with fear and trembling. What causes it? More important: what's the cure for it? What would enable someone like Paul to have the confidence that the Lord is faithful and that He will deliver us from the wickedness around us? How does he know to pray that God would establish and guard us against the evil one?

When bad weather comes, wind and lightning and thunder used to bother our dog, Abbey, and send her into a panic. It would get so bad that the vet prescribed doggie valium to calm her down. Isn't that how we think? for every problem in life there is a pharmaceutical solution. Take a pill. Recently Abbey seems a little bit better. She's almost 12 years old and her hearing and her eyesight are starting to go. The blessed result is that she has become more and more oblivious to the storms of life howling around in the night. On any given evening, she

heads upstairs for bed at 7:00 pm and usually sleeps until morning. And all those things that used to disturb her and put her into a panic attack don't disturb her any more. So it got me thinking. What can we do to insulate ourselves when the storms rage around us? How can we stay calm in the midst of the troubled waters of this world and this life? That's what we are going to find out today.

As Luke 21 opens, the disciples were feeling pretty good. They were strolling around the temple area in Jerusalem. They were admiring the beautiful buildings, all bright and clean, inlaid with gems and precious stones, inlaid with gold. Coming to Jerusalem at Passover time must have been like an annual trip to Disney World. You rejoice at seeing all the beauty of the familiar and you stand in awe at all the things that are new. Then Jesus had to go and burst their bubble with a dose of reality. None of this was going to last. "The days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." It had taken a lifetime to build that temple. Year by year, season by season, hundreds had laboured and worked their whole life for what was there before them. It will all be thrown down!

Jesus' words are filled with warnings. Don't put all your trust in what man can build. But that's not the only warning. As we come to the end of the church year, there are other, more serious warnings to hear. Perilous times are coming, times of persecution and suffering, times of false messiahs and false teachings. Don't be led astray. Don't fall into a panic, don't despair. God has not left the building.

It's not coincidence that today is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. On this second last Sunday of the church year and we are reminded that before the return of Christ on the last day, His bride, the church, will face trial and hardship and persecution. Some will be handed over to death. Some will be imprisoned. Many will suffer for the sake of Christ. Jesus tells His disciples that there will be times of great distress for the church. It will seem as if the whole world has risen up against God's church and His faithful ones. It is in those times that God would say to us, don't be afraid. I will be with you. I will give you a mouth and wisdom to answer them. You will be hated, yes, you may even be put to death but don't be afraid. Not a hair of your head will perish. You will be strengthened for the days ahead. You will be kept safe until the day of the Lord's return.

To understand what Jesus is saying here about the future, you have to understand that there are two parts to that future. There is a near future that describes the lifetime of the disciples. That's why Jesus says this generation will not pass away until these things are fulfilled. There is also a not-so-near future, not the end of the temple, but the end of the world. If you read carefully, you can separate one from the other. The near future sounds like this: *"When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, for these are the days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written ..."*

Does that sound like the end of the world, or is it something else? If it is the end of the world, where are you going to run to? Where are you going to hide? It is not a description of the end of the world. It is a description of what would befall Jerusalem within the next 40 years. This generation, 70 AD, would see Jerusalem surrounded by the armies of Rome. It would be utterly destroyed with not one stone left upon another. The city and all the beautiful buildings that the disciples were admiring, would be gone. The temple with all its glitter and gemstones, gone. When you see these things happen, take heed, understand the signs, and leave the city. And history tells us that the Christians who were in the city in 70 AD took heed, understood the signs, and did leave. That's only part of Jesus' message here. There is an ongoing future that Jesus describes this way:

"Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and 'The time is at hand!' Do not go after them. And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once."

Nations will rise against one another. There will be earthquakes, famines and pestilence. God's people will be persecuted, imprisoned, brought before kings and governments. These are not just things from the past, from the

first century of the early church. These are not just things yet to come at the end of the world. They describe God's church, the bride of Christ throughout the centuries from the days of the early church until the return of Christ on the last day. Think about it. Paul was called before governors and kings to answer for and explain his faith 2000 years ago. Martin Luther was called to give answer for his faith and his teachings before Emperor Charles 500 years ago. It continues today as God's people are called to give an account for what they believe, and as they face imprisonment, and even death for what they believe.

Finally, there is a more distant future that Jesus describes: "There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. There will be distress of nations. The powers of the heavens will be shaken and then, *"They will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory."* That's not the Romans. It's not Jerusalem. It's the end of the world. And as we approach the end of the church year, God's Word calls us to consider the end of history and the end of the world and the return of Christ as Judge and King.

So, what should we do as we face the ongoing future as the bride of Christ suffers in the midst of the world? Will you be overcome with fear? Jesus says no. Will terror overtake you? Jesus says no. Will you fall into endless despair? Jesus says no. When these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. There were always dark times for God's people in the past. Israel in Egypt, but it all changed in a single night when God delivered His people with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Israel in Babylon, that all changed in a single night too when God again delivered His people with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Both times God brought deliverance in a moment of time. They went to bed enslaved, they woke up free.

Finally Jesus tells the disciples a parable. Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. You can recognize the seasons as they come and go. Now you know how to recognize these seasons of the kingdom of God. When the kingdom of God is near, you will know it. You don't have to live in fear and you don't have to put your trust in princes, or presidents, or prime ministers.

Psalm 146 says:

*Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul!
I will praise the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.
Put not your trust in princes,
in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.
When his breath departs he returns to the earth;
on that very day his plans perish.
Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD his God,*

I was telling you that Abbey isn't nearly as afraid of storms anymore because she doesn't hear as well as she used to, nor does she see as well. Even as the storms rage outside, she sleeps in peace. It's not the doggie valium. It's the sleep of the righteous. In her old age, she is insulated from everything that used to frighten her. How can we latch on to that? What do we have to do to calm our fears, and settle our hearts? If you want to be less affected by the storms of life, here's what you need: you need to insulate yourself with the Word of God. Don't let your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness. Don't be overcome with despair and the cares of this life. Don't be trapped by the world's way of thinking, tossed back and forth by every wind that blows. Stay awake, pray, but do this too: look up, your redemption is drawing near.

After the results of Tuesday, some people think that the Messiah has come. Others are equally convinced that God has left the building! Neither of those is true. What is true is this: God is near and God is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one now and will in the end bring you unto eternal life.