

25th Sunday after Pentecost – NOVEMBER 18, 2007

Luke 21:5-19

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, "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."

They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?"

And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, '*I am he!*' and, '*The time is near!*' Do not go after them. When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately."

Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

God Holds the Future

On Friday I was in Vancouver on the UBC campus attending a meeting of the St. Andrew's Hall Board of Management. St. Andrew's Hall is a college of The Presbyterian Church in Canada and is affiliated with Vancouver School of Theology. Among the many things we discussed was the decreasing enrollment for Master of Divinity programs in North America generally. This is the degree required for ordination in the PCC and for many of the mainline denominations. This means that fewer people are planning to pursue theological studies with the intention of serving in leadership within the church. Not only mainline denominations are suffering this fate, there are problems with student numbers in Catholic and evangelical seminaries too. All this draws to our attention the reality that the church is dying – not our church in particular – not Knox – not the Presbyterian Church especially – but **the** church as an institution. It is a bit disturbing really – depressing but perhaps not surprising.

According to theologian Paul Duke, *Jesus didn't have to be a clairvoyant to make predictions about the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Duke maintains that every temple is a doomed house. Every structure and system for housing the holy will wear out its use, will disappoint and die. In the beginning the temple is a tent, simple and supple with room for the Spirit to billow through. But sooner or later we try to manage the mystery. The thing calcifies, thickens, encrusts, fills up with bad furniture – builds itself to an unwarranted weight until it has to fall.*

Last weekend as Remembrance Day was on everyone's mind, so too was peace – or the lack of it in our world today. I heard comments and poems and songs longing for peace, despairing our warring nature, decrying the violence and inability to learn and change. For most it seemed that the church had nothing helpful to say in the matter. As the prophets of

old said, not everyone who cries "peace, peace" is talking about God's peace. "My peace I give to you," said Jesus, "not as the world gives..." [John 14:27] Somehow this peace has been lost even though it is only God's to give. Have we forgotten that it is not our task to make history come out right or to save the world? In Christ Jesus, history has already come out right. We have already seen the end.

I was overcome with the sense that we are irrelevant to so many people and in so many contexts. It is discouraging. Even in my own usually hope-filled person I hear echoes of, "Why bother? Nothing seems to make any difference." There is a pervasive fatalism in the world that seeps in to many conversations with phrases like: "It was just meant to be. It was in the cards. This is your destiny. I guess his number was up – it was just his time."

When facing the uncertainties of the future, many of us will say that since there is nothing we can do about it anyway, the best we can do is grit our teeth, press forward, and hope for the best. It's all rather random anyway and so, in the meanwhile, we'll live life while we have it and let the chips fall where they may. Perhaps we are not even aware of the fatalism that colors our perceptions of the present and the future. Have you heard of the person who declared, "I am not a fatalist! And even if I were, what could I do about it!?"

Surely we can do something. Martin Luther said that if he knew that the world would come to an end tomorrow, he would do something – he would plant a tree.

When I was talking about today's gospel lesson with Preaching Professor Stephen Farris on Friday, he told me about a group of westerners that once traveled to a large Christian community in the Arab world. While there a conflict erupted –brutal attacks, violence and killing ensued. The westerners went to the head of the Christian community saying, "Why don't you do something?" The leader shook his head sadly and replied, "You westerners, you always think you can fix everything."

Many years ago, before Steve and I had any children, I got pregnant and miscarried – four times. We did the required tests and asked the expected questions – followed up with our doctor and always came to the same conclusion – there was no reason for it. The miscarriages were random and unexplainable – therefore not preventable – not fixable. I was particularly unhappy with that answer. I wanted control – since I could not seem to control pregnancy, I decided to exercise and lose weight which I did with a vengeance. I was railing against fatalism with futile attempts at power and restraint.

Have we given up – leaving everything in the hands of fate? Or are we convinced that we can fix it all – that ultimately control is ours for the grasping and we need to take charge of every situation – dominating every facet of our lives and our world?

Some Christians, past and present, attempt to do an end-run on fatalism by claiming that they know already precisely what the future holds. They've turned passages like Luke 21 which we read today (and entire biblical books like Revelation) into a kind of giant secret code that, if we can just crack it, will spell out in neat and precise details the future's exact timelines. We want control and this seems like one way to get it.

In our scripture Jesus foretells the destruction of the temple, warns against being misled by alarmists, and anticipates dreadful times in which his followers must bear witness and endure. Although there is no denying the forward, future bent of this passage, in the end Jesus is not interested in telling us precisely what the future holds but rather **who holds the future**. And when you know who holds the future, you know who holds your every moment in the present time as well.

This passage is part of the apocalyptic literature found throughout the Bible. The word apocalypse means an unveiling or a disclosure or a revelation. It is the kind of writing we

find when times are tough and the only hope is for God to break in. Times were tough when Luke wrote his gospel – Jesus had not returned, the temple had already been destroyed, Stephen had been martyred, Peter and Paul had been executed, Jews and Christians had lost hope. They needed God to set things straight. Luke is recounting the present reality for believers in his generation. They are told not to be terrified, but to remember the one who holds the present and the future.

And what about us? How do we hear these words from Luke's gospel? It is easy to read these words and nod our heads knowingly, thinking that history is drawing to a close. All you have to do is hold a newspaper in one hand and the gospel in the other. "Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom." That seems to be happening all over the place – check. "There will be great earthquakes." What about floods and other weather disasters? Check. "In various places famines and plagues." Check – check. "...dreadful portents and great signs from heaven." Does a gaping hole in the ozone layer count? Check. It seems that Luke's account of the present moment is true for us also.

Wars, natural disasters, nuclear proliferation, homicides, terrorism, global warming – we see it all and we try to wrestle the world into submission – to place it under our control – to fix everything. We concentrate on population control, birth control, climate control – we try to control the drug trade, the sex trade, poverty and the homeless. And even as we seek to manage and manipulate and prepare our defense in advance another mini apocalypse takes place like 9/11 or Katrina or terrorism and the reality of the present moment is revealed. We too need not be terrified but live with confidence that Jesus is with us and provides for us in all circumstances.

It must have been difficult for the disciples to conceive that Herod's great temple, one of the wonders of the world, would be torn down, stone by stone, until it was nothing but a heap of rubble. Such a thing was unimaginable. The temple, the very center of national life and pride, the very seat of God, destroyed? Unthinkable! Yet that is what Jesus told the disciples about this supposedly eternal temple of God, and what Luke reminded the early Christians had happened barely 40 years after Jesus spoke. Is this what is happening to the church in our own time? Do we need to give up because the church as we have known it is crumbling?

I don't believe so because Jesus isn't talking to just anyone whose temple happens to fall down, but to those with the courage to leave the ruins of old systems and bear new faith and the persecutions that go with it. The church is not so fragile as we might think – the church is what you have left when the building burns down and the preacher leaves town.

The disciples ask about when the temple will fall – when the end will come. In a similar conversation with a Pharisee in chapter 17, Jesus is asked when the kingdom of God is coming. Jesus says, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' for, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you." An answer to the question of "when" is "now!" When does Jesus come? Jesus comes today. Whenever two or three are gathered together in his name, Jesus comes. [Mt 18:20] Whenever we break the bread and share the cup, Jesus comes. Whenever we proclaim the good news that the future is in God's hands, Jesus comes.

Do not fall into despairing fatalism or anxiously strive to anticipate and control what is to come. In Christ there is salvation and hope – God holds the future. **Amen.**