

Sunday, November 13, 2022
Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 28 (Year C)

Luke 21.5-19

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/3295653310681241>

(Sermon begins at about 16:05)

“Faithfulness and Endurance”

All three of our scripture readings for today, either directly or indirectly, deal with perceptions and concerns about the end times and God’s judgement. Concerns that contain images of and speak to the potential for destruction and ensuing chaos. And, to an extent, with the angst that such times produce. Not unlike some of the speculation of what might have happened—and maybe still could happen—as a result of Tuesday’s midterm elections. The exact nature of the destruction and chaos varying, depending on who you ask and who actually ends up being elected after all the votes are counted, runoff elections held, and probably even a few legal challenges adjudicated.

Okay, maybe the 2022 midterm elections will not signal the end times, the destruction of the world, or at least of those who are not among the faithful. We’ll just have to wait and see on that one. But such events do bring their share of concern about our collective and individual well-being. Which is a universal concern whenever circumstances deviate even slightly from what we have known until now. Particularly when the potential for change is on the horizon. We certainly see this in scripture. Our scripture readings for today deal with impending change. Major change. As in earth-shattering change. All dealing with views regarding the end of the ages and the eventuality of divine judgment.

Our first reading is from the Prophet Malachi, recording a series of oracles to the people in the aftermath of exile in Babylon, their return to their homeland, and rebuilding of the temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonians. Malachi’s aim is to correct the religious and social behavior of the Israelites and particularly the religious leaders, in post-exile Jerusalem. In response to what was perceived as a serious lack of commitment and adherence to divine law. What we hear today is a warning that those who do not return to proper behavior and religious practices will be subject to God’s judgement. And it won’t be pretty.

Our Epistle reading from the Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians specifically addresses those in the church who are basically slacking off. Not unlike what we hear in Malachi. In the early years of the Christian Church, it was generally thought that Jesus’ return would be imminent. Again, the people are anticipating the end times and God’s judgement. This idea created a bit of a problem for the church in Thessalonica, which apparently held property in common and supported all the members of the church out of its collective resources. Since the Lord was going to be coming back at any time, some of the members took a bit of a “why bother” attitude. These were guilty of not doing their part to support the community, and yet wanted to be supported nonetheless. Paul basically lectures those who are “living in idleness, mere busybodies, [and] not doing any work,” and tells them that if they are being supported by

the community, it is only fair that they do their part in return. That matters of right and wrong prevail, even when facing the end of the ages. While not explicitly stated, the implication is that when the Lord does return, they will be judged for their behavior. And again, it won't be pretty.

Our Gospel reading finds Jesus and the disciples at the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus has already made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and is mere days from his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. As the disciples admire the beauty and elegance of that grand complex, Jesus foretells of its destruction: "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." This statement by Jesus is more shocking than might appear on the surface. The temple in Jerusalem was not just the center of Jewish religious authority. Because of the centrality of Judaism to all aspects of life in first-century Israel, the temple was the religious, social, and political center of the Jewish world. The temple was the most important religious site for the Jews, as it was the only place where scripturally required sacrifices could be made. As such, it was the destination for pilgrimage by devout Jews, particularly for high holy days. It was also the seat of the High Priest and the highest echelon of Jewish leadership. Over time, the temple also became the political center of Israel, as the religious authorities effectively became the civil authorities, as well. While there was a king, he was effectively a puppet of the Roman Empire. Much of the day-to-day governance was really performed by the temple authorities in an uneasy alliance with the Roman occupiers. As long as the temple authorities worked to keep the peace, to keep the populace in line, the Roman authorities would allow the temple to continue to operate; would allow Jewish worship practices to continue. And with the bringing together of the religious and political power into one place, the temple also effectively became the social and cultural center of the Jewish people.

Because of the overall importance of the temple, particularly with this confluence of authority and activity, any talk of the destruction of the temple would have been an absolute shock to those hearing Jesus' words. Not just a shock, but blasphemy. Such a tragedy would signal the end of life as the Jewish people knew it at that time. An event that would be akin to the cataclysmic destruction wrought by any major disaster, natural or manmade. In fact, Jesus uses images of such disastrous situations to convey the magnitude of an event that did become a historical fact. About 40 years after his own death, the temple was indeed destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD, forever changing the Jewish faith and its practices.

But Jesus is not just talking about the destruction of a building. He notes that there is more to the impending end times than just physical destruction. More than wars and insurrections; more than nation rising against nation; more than earthquakes, famines, and plagues. Jesus makes the oracle about future destruction and chaos personal—citing the potential impacts to the lives of the faithful. "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." Jesus uses the foretelling of the destruction of the temple as an image for something that would affect both him and his followers. He was talking about another impending event that would have equally seismic impacts on the religious landscape of Israel and indeed, the entire world. He is also foretelling his own destruction, his own death, at the hands of the temple authorities and the Roman occupiers. And given the religious climate at the time, his own persecution and death would open the way for the potential persecution

and even death of his followers. Again, we do know that this became historical fact, with persecutions and even martyrdoms of Jesus' followers for nearly 300 years until Christianity was made the official religion of the Empire under Constantine in 325 AD.

Admittedly, the events Jesus foretells and the potential for persecution he warns his disciples about are isolated to a particular period of time that are now, for us, ancient history. Yet, his words still carry weight and significance for us 2,000 years later. As he tells his disciples, the whole purpose of the trials and tribulations they will endure is because "This will give you an opportunity to testify." That even though they will be arrested, persecuted, thrown in prison, brought before kings and governors, possibly betrayed by those closest to them, and possibly even be put to death, this will not be in vain. That through whatever persecution they and countless other of Jesus' followers will endure "because of [his] name," they will be given the opportunity to testify to their faith. That times of persecution and betrayal will be the time not for complaining and seeking vengeance but rather opportunities for proclaiming the Gospel. That in the midst of apparent disaster and destruction, they have the opportunity to bear witness to the love of God through Christ and the power that has in a world so in need of healing.

Jesus was speaking to a very particular set of circumstances: his own impending Passion and death, as well as the ongoing persecution the early Christians and the early Church would face. But his words also provide guidance for how the Church and its people in any age deal with difficulties and struggles.

We are currently living through a time of seemingly unprecedented struggles. A global pandemic that has taken the lives of millions of people. A major war playing out on the world stage. Climate change. The economic fallout from the combined effects of these ongoing concerns: disruptions in the supply chain, labor shortages, spikes in energy prices, resulting in record inflation and the threat of recession. All of these being global in nature. And here in our own nation, some of the most significant political divisions, some of the most vitriolic political maneuvering and discourse, in our nation's history. A phenomenon that is playing out not just in the United States, but being mirrored in a number of other places around the world. All of this coming together in a way that can make us question whether these may not be the end times. Not unlike the situation faced by the people of Malachi's time, or in the Thessalonian church, or at the time of Jesus.

I do not mean to imply that the end times are upon us. That is for God and God alone to decide. All I'm saying is that given the variety and magnitude of struggles our world faces, it can sure feel like the end of the world as we know it. But looking back at human history shows us that we have been through other difficult times in past. Wars, plagues, major disasters, significant political and economic upheavals. We've been through it and have survived.

What our scripture readings for today tell us, as people of faith, as the people of God, is that in times of struggle and difficulties, rather than lose our heads, rather than running around proclaiming "the sky is falling," we are to remain faithful and steadfast. We are to hold on to the teachings of our Lord. If anything, we are to take the opportunity during times like these to proclaim the Gospel that we know to be true. To bear witness to God's love and to God's saving

power. Trusting that, with God's help and guidance, we will prevail. Trusting that we will be strengthened. Trusting, as Jesus tells his disciples, that "not a hair of your head will perish [and] by your endurance you will gain your souls."