

Signs of the Times
Sermon, November 14, 2010
Stewardship Sunday
Texts: II Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

In today's Gospel, Jesus and His disciples had just arrived in Jerusalem. The disciples were admiring the beauty of the Temple, which was one of the great wonders of the ancient world. The Temple was a massive structure and a tremendous symbol of national pride. This Temple was a renovation of the Temple built in Haggai's time under Zerubbabel and Joshua in fifth century BC. Those of you here last week may remember the laments of those in Haggai's time who remembered the original Temple built by Solomon and destroyed by the Babylonians, and how they would never be able to match the grandeur and beauty in their rebuilding efforts; well, centuries later King Herod was determined to match and even surpass the glory of Solomon's Temple. So he set to work on a massive renovation beginning in 19 BC; the renovation was completed eighty-two years later in 63 A.D. Some ten thousand laborers were involved in the renovation; it was indeed the buzz of the town and probably the major source of employment. At the time of this Gospel reading (@30 AD), the major parts of the renovations had been done, but the Temple was still some three decades from completion. The smallest stones in the walls of the massive structure weighed as much or more than the car you drove here this morning; two to three tons each. The larger stones weighed up to fifty tons and more! The Temple was many times larger than any building the disciples had ever seen before.

And as they stared in amazement, Jesus makes one of the few specific predictions of his entire ministry. He predicts this magnificent Temple would one day come falling down, that it would be leveled. "Not one stone will be left on another;" He said, "every one of them will be thrown down." And about forty years later, that, in fact, happened. In 70 AD, the Temple did come down, just seven years after the renovation was finally finished. The Roman general Titus, with 80,000 men, set siege to Jerusalem. It was a difficult city to take, set on a hill, and defended by fierce fighting. When the siege was successful and the city taken, Titus ordered the whole city and the Temple razed to the ground. The historian Josephus, who was actually there, tells us 97,000 residents of the city were taken captive and over one million died. A portion of a retaining wall of the Temple, called the Western wall or the Wailing Wall, still remains to this day. As some of you know, the Wailing Wall is the most holy prayer spot for present-day Jewish faithful. It really is a moving and inspiring place to be; there are people praying at this holy site 24/7; in fact, you can even access a live camera feed via the internet (*just "google" Western Wall cam; several options are available. I did so at 10:30 last night (which, I think, would have been 4:30 AM Israel time, and the courtyard was full with people praying).*)

At the time Jesus spoke these words, the disciples probably listened in disbelief. This magnificent Temple would come down? Unbelievable! "Teacher," they said. "When will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?" Jesus replied: "Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and, 'The time is near.' Do not follow them. When you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away." Then he said, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven."

Just to note: not even Jesus knew when "the End" would be, as in "the End" of all time. Except for a brief allusion later in this passage, Jesus is not primarily talking about "The End," He is talking of the days in between now and The End. Just to be clear, Jesus' words on the signs of the times are about *all* His disciples' "times," including ours! He warns of false prophets and charlatans who will appear on the scene claiming to have the inside track, exploiting people's fears and anxieties and their pocketbooks. During my teen years in the 70's, the most well-known "prophet" of the day was author Hal Lindsey of The Late Great Planet Earth. It was a best seller, as was Lindsey's sequel The 80's, Countdown to Armageddon? (*a book which quietly disappeared from the stores 'round about 1989*). He wove intricate and convincing tapestries of selective Bible verses, prophecies and current events to foretell the imminent end of the world along with the second Advent of Jesus closing out human history. To make a long story short, the only "fore"-telling he fulfilled was to be married four times ... and though not an accurate fortune *teller*, he certainly was a fortune *maker* ... he made a mint with these books, just as the Left Behind authors are doing in our day (*on a related note, you probably have guessed I'm not a big fan of that Christian science fiction series ... it has taken tremendous liberties with the text and context of the Scriptures ... but that's another sermon*). By the way, Lindsey is still active in talking of Biblical prophecy

... why he is still seen as a prophecy expert after all his predictions have miserably failed is a mystery to me. Jesus' words are clear: "Do not go after them. Do not be distracted or misled by them. Ignore the false prophets." There is work here to do in the time we have, and such speculative preoccupation takes us away from our primary task as the people of God. Wars, insurrections, earthquakes, famines, plagues, all will continue to occur and are not signs the end is near. These signs occur in any day and any age. Yes, like those in 70 AD, we also know how magnificent buildings can come down tragically, one floor upon another, through political acts of violence, leaving a smoldering pit of twisted and scattered building material ... think 9-11. There will continue to be wars and rumors of war, nation will rise against nation, there will be earthquakes, famines, plagues. These are signs not of some future day, but signs that it is time for you and me to follow Jesus more seriously still, here in the time we have right now!

Jesus foretells hardship for His disciples. He tells them they are going to be arrested and persecuted, handed over to the synagogues and prisons and brought before kings and governors because of their association with Jesus. Some will even be killed. But Jesus doesn't tell them to lie low or to keep their mouths shut; no, He tells them not to fear. He will be with them. He will give them words to speak. He tells them their hardship will be turned into an occasion of witness. And we know from Acts that turmoil constantly surrounded the disciples' ministries, just as Jesus had warned. John and Peter hauled before the Sanhedrin, James' beheading, Peter's imprisonment, Paul before Felix, the many attempts on Paul's life ... but each was an occasion in which the gospel was boldly proclaimed. The history of Christian missionary endeavor from that time to this very day has been a fulfillment of Jesus' warning. On Stewardship Sunday, it is important for us to remember that for two thousand years people have been giving in very costly and even sacrificial ways for this gospel, not just with their money and time, but with their very lives. Stewardship is about being disciples, obeying Christ's word, showing Christ's love, and like Him, giving of ourselves in every way ... and especially so in the hard times. Jesus also makes this promise, "Not a hair of your head will perish. By standing firm you will gain life." When Jesus said not a hair of our heads will perish, He did not mean our hair will not fall out, or that our bodies will never suffer. He did not mean we will be exempt from catastrophes. What He meant was not a hair of our heads will *forever* perish. We may suffer loss; in fact, we may suffer grievous losses, but all earthly loss is temporary. God's power and promise to restore is greater than any power or threat that would forever crush us.

In short, Jesus' words on the signs of the times are not about "The End," or "The Day," but they are about Now and Today as well as the days to come. Now and Today and in the days to come we are to be signs, we are called to be faithful witnesses directing the way to our Savior. When famine, plague, wars, insurrections, earthquakes occur, these are not signs of Christ's imminent coming, but signs that we need to take Jesus' words more literally still, meeting the needs of the hungry, working to overcome sickness and calamity, promoting what is good and right and true, being the hands and feet of Jesus serving a world in need. We are not called to a religious escapism which gives us permission to withdraw from the world, bury our heads in the religious sand and wait for Jesus while the world heads to hell in a handbasket!

This is Paul's main concern in his second letter to the Thessalonians. As noted last week, he had assured them Jesus had not yet returned, and the best is yet to come. He now warns them against sitting on their hands, letting others do the necessary work that needs to be done, just waiting for Jesus to come and fix everything in a world that seems so far down the path of destruction. The problem in Thessalonica was some had done just that; they simply dropped out, neither participating in nor supporting the work of that young church, but simply waiting for Jesus. They hadn't stopped believing; they had just quit doing anything practical about it. They weren't being busy, they were being busy *bodies*. And probably snarky ones at that; after all, busybodies spend an inordinate amount of time criticizing those bodies who really are busy!

Believers who've just stopped working is not simply a first century problem in Thessalonica. Think of people you know who have simply dropped out of the church, give nothing or little to the church and participate very infrequently in the life or work of the church, if ever. If you ask them, they will tell you they still believe in Jesus. Apparently, though, they can't be bothered to do much in the church to do His work and to help the world on His behalf.

What to do about those people? Paul says two things: first, do not become like them! *Never* tire in doing what is right. Second, reach out to them. Bring them back! There is ministry to be done and supported, there is joy and good news to be shared, there are places to proclaim Christ's lordship in our lives and over all life, places to joyfully join in with the Jesus Who is already here, continuing the work of redemption in this world. In *these* days, not in some future day to come.