

Mark 13:1-8

In our text today, Jesus and his disciples are visiting the temple, which at the time was being rebuilt by Herod the Great.

As they were leaving the temple, one of the disciples said to Jesus, “Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!”

The Jewish historian Josephus who lived in the first century wrote, “Whatever was not overlaid with gold was pure white.”

Herod gave a golden vine for one of the decorations.

Its grape clusters were as tall as a person made of solid gold.

The beautiful temple was the center of the Jewish nation and at the heart of its faith and identity.

The immense wealth that was put into its construction made it one of the wonders of the world.

Some of the huge blocks of marble measured over 22 meters in length, 2 ½ meters in height and 3 meters in width.

The eastern front and part of the side wall were covered with gold plates and the rest with gleaming marble.

The splendor of the temple as decorated by Herod has only recently come to light through archeological investigations on the temple mount.

The disciples, caught up in the beauty of the temple, were speaking of its splendor.

They must have felt like Jacob who said, “How awesome is this place....the house of God; this is the gate of heaven” (Genesis 28:17).

But what was said in innocence prompted a response from Jesus that was more than they had expected.

What they saw was not what Jesus saw.

Beneath all that seemed to be established forever was the ever-present reality of change and decay.

Jesus said, “Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left on another; everyone will be thrown down.”

He was predicting the fall of the temple, a fall that would actually occur in A.D. 70 when the Romans under Titus completely destroyed Jerusalem and the temple buildings.

After its destruction, stones were pried apart to collect the gold leaves

that melted from the roof when the temple was set on fire. Excavations in 1968 uncovered some of these large stones. It was shocking, for the fall of the temple meant to the Jews the collapse of their whole world.

It was much worse than the events of September 11, 2001 when the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City collapsed. Imagine that someone told us today that “not one stone” of the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa or the White House in Washington, D.C. “will be left on another.”

It would bring radical change to life as we know it today. Our immediate response would be much like that of the disciples: “Tell us, when will these things happen?

And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?”

Jesus responded to their questions with several predictions:

“Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines” (v.8).

“They will lay hands on you and persecute you” (Luke 21:12).

All of these predictions can now be related to events associated with the fall of Jerusalem in the first century.

After Roman Emperor Nero’s death in A.D. 69, one year before the fall of the temple, four of his captains battled among themselves for the right to rule over the Roma Empire.

There were brutal wars, and kingdom did rise against kingdom.

Since Jesus predicted earthquakes and famines as signs that the end was near, believers saw the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D. as the end of the world.

It was one of the most catastrophic eruptions in European history.

Mount Vesuvius spewed a deadly cloud of volcanic gas and ash to a height of 33 kilometers and released a hundred thousand times the thermal energy of the Hiroshima atomic bomb obliterating and burying many settlements, the most well-known being Pompeii.

In many parts of the ancient world people would starve to death and suffer terrible disease.

Some also saw great signs of terror as early Christians were being tortured and killed – just as Jesus had predicted.

In the 14th century when the bubonic plague known as the Black Death swept across Europe resulting in more than 50 million deaths and marauding armies plundering and destroying villages and towns, believers saw in these horrific events signs of the end times: wars, famines and pestilence.

During the last 2000 years, in every century, people have expected or predicted the end of the world.

Even Martin Luther at a time of economic, political and social upheaval in the 16th century considered the signs in heaven and on earth as being an indication of the nearness of the end.

In 1528 he expected the end to come before he had time to finish the translation of the Old Testament.

But Luther believed that even if we think the end of the world is near, we must still live a life of faith, love and stewardship because that is what God has called us to do.

We should never out of fear passively withdraw from the world, but instead out of love for God help make the world a better place.

When asked what he would do if he knew that the world would come to an end tomorrow, he replied, "Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree."

In the 18th century, Jonathan Edwards, one of America's most profound philosopher and theologian, preached his famous sermon "Sinners in the hands of an angry God."

As people listened to his description of sinners being thrown into the fires of hell, they were moved to fear which, in turn, led to one of the biggest revivals ever.

It is still referred today as the "great awakening."

The time for them to change was now.

The day of the Lord was near.

What was true for them is true for us today: The time is near for us to realize that nothing we have built will remain forever –

not our monuments, not our corporate structures, not our churches, our cities, our wealth, our nation.

Like the temple of Jerusalem, these will not last forever.

But this is a message of hope for Christians.

It says that in spite of change and decay,

in spite of all the endings that will occur,

in spite of the fact that our lives may be threatened,

by our faith in Christ we will have peace with God and hope and joy.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote these words of encouragement:

“We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God...because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us” (5:1b-5).

What does this all mean for us today?

It means that the mission of Christ’s Church is not yet finished.

The mission of this congregation is not yet finished either.

Jesus calls us to be “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world.”

We should influence and touch others positively,

just as seasoning brings out the best flavor in food.

And we should be a beacon of light and truth

and not shut our light off from the rest of the world.

Now is the time for us to once more find courage, strength and hope that

God’s kingdom and truth still abide in a world filled with evil, fear, uncertainties, terror, economic, political and social upheaval because

God is in control, even when we feel desperately out of control.

God did reveal himself to his people as the “Sovereign LORD,”

“Adonai Yahweh” in Hebrew, the Creator and Controller of all things.

We can entrust our lives to him and he will sustain us.

He will never let us be shaken and nothing can take away our wellbeing or destroy our security (Psalm 55:22).

Mark in today's gospel warns of troubled times ahead, but he encourages us to trust in the amazing grace and unfailing love of God to keep all who trust and believe in him. We can be sure that the temples of this world will come down, that earthquakes will split the earth and "nation will rise against nation." But above all, we can be sure of this: The day will come when Christ will "come again in glory...and his kingdom will have no end" as we confess in the Nicene Creed. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion will endure through all generations (Psalm 145:13). Although change and decay may come, God is in charge and the ultimate outcome will be eternal victory. Jesus admonished his fearful disciples: "Stand firm, and you will win life" (Luke 21:19). May God help us to live our life serenely without giving in to the fears that are all around us and be assured that our future rests in God's all-powerful and gracious hands. So let's go ahead and plant our apple tree! Amen.

© 2024 Horst Aechtner. All Rights Reserved