

Faith for Unsettled Times

Luke 21:5-19

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on November 13, 2016]

I

Predicting the future is risky business.

History is littered with those who made predictions, prognostications and pronouncements about the future that turned out to be wrong.

In 1903 the president of the Michigan Savings Bank told Henry Ford's lawyer that the horse was here to stay and the automobile was only a passing fad.

In 1946 movie producer Darryl Zanuck said, "Television won't last because people will soon get tired of staring at a plywood box every night."

In 1949 *Popular Mechanics* magazine made this prediction:

"Where a calculator on the ENIAC is equipped with 18,000 vacuum tubes and weighs 30 tons, computers in the future may have only 1,000 vacuum tubes and weigh only 1.5 tons."

In 1962 an executive at the Decca Recording Co. told Brian Epstein:

"We don't like their sound, and guitar music is on the way out."

The executive was speaking, of course, of the band that Epstein managed—four lads from Liverpool who called themselves *The Beatles*.

In 1964 an executive at United Artists rejected casting Ronald Reagan as the lead in the film "The Best Man," saying

"He doesn't have that presidential look."

And 2016 will forever be remembered as the year when pollsters, pundits, and political prognosticators all across the ideological spectrum were wrong in predicting that Hillary Clinton would defeat Donald Trump.

Predicting the future,
even with numerous polls to rely on,
is risky business.

II

As the disciples were marveling at the grandeur and glory of the Temple,
the dwelling place of God on earth,
Jesus made a bold prediction:

"Do you see all these great buildings?"

*The day will come when not one stone will be left on another—
all will be destroyed.*

To the disciples this was as risky and far-fetched a prediction as they could possibly imagine.

The Jerusalem temple was one of the largest structures on earth at that time,
one of the wonders of the ancient world.

The smallest stones in the structure weighed 2 to 3 tons.

Many of them weighed as much as 50 tons.

The largest existing stone, part of the Western Wall, is nearly 40 feet long and 10 feet high, and weighs hundreds of tons!

The stones were so immense that neither mortar nor any other binding material was used between the stones.

Their stability was maintained by the great weight of the stones.

The walls of the Temple towered over Jerusalem,

rising over 400 feet in one area.

Inside the four walls was a 45 acre compound where a quarter of a million people could fit comfortably.

No sports stadium in the world today comes even close.

So you can well understand the disciples' surprise and why they exclaimed to Jesus:

"Look, teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!"

The disciples could not conceive of any force on earth that could bring down those stones.

As they walked down the Kedron Valley and up the Mount of Olives, the disciples wanted to hear more.

Jesus' prediction that a structure so immense would be leveled to the ground seemed implausible.

But they pressed Jesus for more information.

They wanted to know when this would happen and what would be the sign that this was about to take place?

In their voices was fear.

Fear of the unknown.

Fear that their lives were about to change forever.

Jesus had not made any predictions like this one.

This was different.

This, they could understand.

Forty years after Jesus spoke these words the prediction came true.

In 70 AD the Temple was destroyed by the Roman legions under Titus and all that is left today is the Western Wall, Judaism's most sacred site.

What are we to learn from this prediction and its fulfillment?

III

First, we learn that faith for unsettled times is not to be found in religious institutions.

Imagine yourself in first century Jerusalem.

From anywhere in the city you can look up and catch a glimpse of the Temple.

It had been the center of Jewish religion for 800 years,
the dominant institution of Jewish life and culture.

In the Temple the Jews offered sacrifices,
confessed their sins,
gave their first fruits of the harvest,
and yearly sacrificed a lamb for the nations' sins.

It was here that Passover,
Pentecost,
the Day of Atonement,
the Feasts of Tabernacles,
and the Feast of Weeks were celebrated.

So central was the Temple to their life and worship,
that the major question would be:
How would they worship God without it?

It was a question for which the disciples had no answer.

We understand how people get tied to sacred places.

But the Temple was unique.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, God himself is said to be the architect,
giving the exact dimension of the Altar, the grounds, the Walls, the doors,
down to the very size of the stones.

This was God's building, God's throne on earth.

Did you know that the Christians continued to make sacrifices at the temple after
Jesus' death?

Paul even makes an offering (Acts 21).

It is the place where John's birth was announced
and the infant Jesus recognized by Simeon and Anna.

When Jesus was 12 years of age, his religious acumen was recognized by the
leaders of the Temple,
and it was where years later he drove out the money changers.

With the Temple so central to life, how would they worship God without it?

I like the story told about Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) in his later years.

On that special evening at the Vienna Music Hall when his great oratorio
"The Creation" was performed, the audience was caught up with tremendous
emotion.

When the passage "And there was light!" was reached, the chorus and
orchestra burst forth in such power that the crowd could no longer restrain
its enthusiasm.

The vast assembly arose to spontaneous applause in the middle of the piece.

Haydn, weakened by age and confined to a wheelchair, struggled to stand and motioned for silence.

With his hand pointed toward heaven, he said,
 "No, no, not from me, but from thence comes all!"

Having given the glory and praise to the Creator,
 he fell back into his chair exhausted.

Perhaps that is the lesson Jesus would have the disciples learn.

Haydn directed the crowd's attention away from his talents to God's,
 away from the beautiful music to the majesty of the Creator.

Whether a great oratorio or a Temple devoted to God,
 neither deserves our devotion,
 only the One from thence comes all!

IV

And secondly, we learn that faith for unsettled times is not found in signs.

*Tell us, Teacher, the disciples insist, tell us when will these things happen,
 and what will be the sign that they all are about to be fulfilled?*

The first thing Jesus tells them is not to be misled by false teachers and false prophets.

"Do not go after them," he says.

I like the story of the TV preacher who was pushing his new book that supposedly explained everything one needed to know about the coming of Jesus and the end of time.

"You must have this book," he said over and over again, as a telephone number (not even toll-free) flashed along the bottom of the TV screen.

This preacher claimed to have prophetic insight into world events, and for a mere \$14.95 one could have the benefit of his wisdom.

He even implied that one would not survive the coming terrors unless one bought his book.

A certain pastor called the number and suggested to the poor operator that if this preacher really thought his book was so vital to the survival of the planet, and that the end was so near, he would be giving the book away!

"I mean; he won't need the money, right? It's all coming to an end anyway. Who needs a bank account? True, it costs money to print, but he will not have to pay for it if it goes as he says."

The operator was not amused: "Sorry, sir," she said, "but I don't know much about theology,"

To which the pastor responded,

"Neither does the writer of the book you're selling."

Jesus warns us against such things, and then in verse 9 he says,

"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."

Here is the point Jesus is making:

World events are not indicators of the End Times.

Wars,

earthquakes,

international political instability,

famine,

persecution...

these, says Jesus, are not a sign of the end—
they are simply realities of life from the beginning.

Jesus goes on to spell out how his followers are to cope in times of uncertainty and confusion.

When you are persecuted,
 when you are hauled into court and called to testify,
 don't worry about it.

I'll give you the words and wisdom that will reduce all your accusers to stammers and stutters. (The Message)

When even your own family members turn against you and betray you
 and all hate you because of your faith in me,
 know that I will be with you.

Every detail of your body and soul—even the hairs of your head!—is in my care; nothing of you will be lost. Staying with it—that's what is required. Stay with it to the end. You won't be sorry; you'll be saved. (The Message)

V

When Jesus spoke these words in Luke 21, he was seeking to give his followers the faith and resilience to face the unsettled times that were coming.

He wanted his followers to understand that...

God is not contained within even the walls of the Temple, and...

God's love transcends any one specific place and any one specific people.

These are important lessons for us in the aftermath of the election on Tuesday.

We have elected a president (or should I say the Electoral College will be electing a president?), who will enter office on January 20 having made bold, audacious, and, in some cases, disturbing promises.

What was encouraging was his acceptance speech, which I got up to watch at 3 am Wednesday morning.

I was receiving alerts on my phone, so I got out of bed and turned on the TV (I wasn't sleeping anyway).

And I was glad to hear Mr. Trump call for unity, saying he wanted to be the president for all the people, and his tone was humble and conciliatory.

Also encouraging was the apparent cordiality of his meeting with President Obama, including when he said he would call on the President for counsel.

What was not so encouraging was the Tweet he sent out Thursday night that said the protests taking place in many cities were being incited by professional protestors and the media; "Very unfair!" he trumpeted.

Ironic in view of November 6, 2012 when, after President Obama was reelected, Trump tweeted,

We can't let this happen. We should march on Washington and stop this travesty. Our nation is totally divided!

Never in our history have we elected a president with so many unknown variables and so many unanswered questions.

On any given day, we simply do not know which Donald Trump will show up in the Oval Office.

We cannot say whether his harsh and divisive campaign rhetoric will carry over into his administration.

All of us should be concerned about that,
including and especially those who voted for him.

What should also concern every American,
including and especially people of faith like us,
is that since Tuesday, people from all types of communities—
black, Latino, Muslim, Jewish, Asian, LGBT people, and women—
have been physically assaulted,
harassed with hate speech,
or been the targets of racist graffiti.

I could give you numerous examples, but that would make this sermon entirely too long.

My question is, when will President-elect Trump condemn these actions and call for civility and respect for all Americans of whatever race, creed, and ethnicity?

We cannot deny the fact that our culture has seen a shift over the past months, and has worsened over the last week.

Therefore, as Christians we must speak out against bullying, injustice, racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia in all their forms.

It is up to all of us to stand against such behaviors and to stand in solidarity with marginalized persons in our society, who potentially have the most to lose from a Trump administration.

VI

I don't know if Jesus' words alleviated the disciples' fears and anxieties about the future.

But I do know that his words still inspire and encourage us today, for we too are faced with unsettled times.

We too have false teachers (we call them pundits) who seek to sow confusion, doubt, and fear.

What Jesus offers us in these verses is the conviction, the confidence rooted in a faith that will stand firm when everything we once thought solid is upended.

Our faith is not to be placed in Temples or Signs or in any human institution.

Our faith is to be placed in Jesus Christ alone.

For we cannot be saved by Donald Trump or by Hillary Clinton.

We cannot be saved by the ACLU or by a new Supreme Court.

We cannot be saved by the Family Research Council
or by People for the American Way.

We cannot be saved by the Democratic Party or by the Republican Party.

Our salvation rests in God alone.

And it is only through Jesus Christ that we find the faith that will enable us to endure through all the unsettled times that are to come.

So let us resolve, brothers and sisters, to place our faith not in the institutions of government or politics or religion,
but in the Son of God,
the Savior of the World,
who loves all people
and makes a place for all people
at his banquet table.

For as Father Daniel Berrigan's *Credo* states:

*I can only tell you what I believe; I believe:
I cannot be saved by foreign policies.
I cannot be saved by the sexual revolution.
I cannot be saved by the gross national product.
I cannot be saved by nuclear deterrents.
I cannot be saved by aldermen, priests, artists,
plumbers, city planners, social engineers,
nor by the Vatican,
nor by the World Buddhist Association,
nor by Hitler, nor by Joan of Arc,
nor by angels and archangels,
nor by powers and dominions,
I can be saved only by Jesus Christ.*

Amen.

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