

Luke 21:5-19

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

November 13, 2022

If you knew you were going to die in just a few days, what would you talk about with your family and friends? Probably not the weather, nor sports or politics (we've all had enough of that recently, right?). I'm sure weightier topics would be on your mind as you said your good-byes. That was the situation with Jesus during Holy Week. He spoke about matters that we focus on today as we approach the close of another church year.

THE END IS COMING

- I. Cause for concern
- II. Cause for comfort

The dialog before us was prompted by a question from some disciples. Jesus and the Twelve were in Jerusalem early in the week following his triumphant entry on Palm Sunday. A few of the men commented on the beauty of the temple, where Jesus had been teaching them. The present structure was not the magnificent place of worship that Solomon had built, as that had been destroyed centuries earlier by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. The Jewish people had rebuilt a lesser model after returning from the seventy years of captivity. That had been a lengthy span of time ago, so for many years Herod had been refurbishing it for them. It was still a beautiful building with fine adornments.

Jesus warned them not to be too taken with what they saw, for it would all be destroyed. That would happen in a few decades at the hands of the Romans. "When would it occur?" the men asked. A parallel account in Matthew indicates they asked a double question, tying it in also with the end of the world.

The Savior responded with signs of the end, sometimes termed "signs of the times." We can read and recognize them just as we view the shorter hours of daylight these weeks and know that winter is on the way. He started with a warning against false teachers. "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." Speculation about the end of the world prompts all sorts of mistaken claims and attempts at date setting in fascination with fanciful scenarios. Be on your guard against getting carried away with them. Say no more than what God has clearly revealed.

There will be preliminary signs that are constant as time is passing. "When you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away." The world witnesses constant fighting despite peacekeeping efforts or the "war to end all wars" as many viewed World War I. Lengthy struggles between nations, devastating civil wars and world wars will continue as history marches on.

Signs in nature also occur. "There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven." Occurrences of devastation point to the time when everything will be destroyed. It will picture but not equal the actual end of all. Jesus mentioned pestilences or plagues, might we say pandemics? Remember these have struck in the past, including a century ago, not just our recent experience. Luke didn't mention every detail. At the very end the sun and moon will stop shining and the stars will fall from the sky. We can understand why there will be fear on the Last Day.

Jesus then got personal as he told of mistreatment his followers would experience. "But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name." Being a Christian is not easy. There would be opposition, led by Satan, who would do much the same as they did to Christ. Arrests, trials and deaths awaited them.

Troubles would also come from their own families. "You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death." We heard in readings this past summer of the division that the gospel message produces. You are either for Christ or against him. Which side you are on will even split homes, which properly should be a place to nurture faith, to support and encourage believers. Some will try to silence the voice of Christ's followers because they can't stand the message of God's truth condemning sin and pointing to the only solution in Jesus. Bluntly Jesus noted, "All men will hate you because of me." Not a happy thought.

"Why?" we might ask with a voice of protest. Satan did not want to be beneath the Lord so rebelled against him. He convinced the first people they could be like God. Although both that angel and the humans failed, they still try to take over the role of the divine. There's a voice inside that they will try to silence, that tells them they are not up to the task but instead are accountable to God and will be found lacking. They fear they will not make it, come Judgment Day. That voice is accurate. We are sinful. We disobey God in thought, word and action. We have

committed evil and failed to do good. Doom is hanging over our heads. The fires of hell await, and they are real. People don't like to think of it so try to silence the voices warning them. That the end is coming is a legitimate cause for concern.

II.

At the same time the Lord Jesus gave a cause for comfort as he spoke of the end. In those scary experiences and trials that he mentioned, we will be guided. Don't fret or be filled with anxiety. "For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict." Often when we face questions about our faith or opposition, we are concerned that it is up to us to come up with a formidable, convincing argument. While not opposing study, growth in knowledge and a grasp of his teaching, Jesus wanted believers to realize that we are not alone even if we stand before high officials who hold the power to condemn us. The Spirit will guide your speaking.

As Christians use the Word, his power is at work effectively. "This will result in your being witnesses to them." A time of opposition becomes an opportunity to spread God's Word. Not everybody will instantly fall on their knees in repentance, but seeds will be planted and God will be glorified. Who knows what may later occur?

The promise of our Savior is not idle. We think of examples like the Apostle Paul's bold testimony when on trial. Or there was Martin Luther at the Diet in Worms before the emperor, refusing to recant, willing to face even death for the sake of the gospel truth. You may have personal experiences, probably not in court, where you were led to speak appropriate words in challenging circumstances. The Spirit put them in your mouth.

With God on our side, no harm can come to us, Jesus asserted. He is greater than all, so says, "Not a hair of your head will perish." Another time he said our hairs are all numbered. That's an astounding claim, but it expresses the extent of God's individual care for us. Each one of us is important to him, even down to such small details of our lives. We are secure.

"Really?" we might question as we hear these words. We can cite numerous cases of believers who were hurt as they were faithful. There was Stephen in the book of Acts, stoned to death after his testimony, and a host of martyrs fed to the lions or burned at the stake. People still suffer greatly for their faith in some lands.

The Savior was getting at a higher truth. What is harm? Meeting death for their faith, even under horrible circumstances, is not loss for a Christian. It just means

that he or she made it to heaven sooner than they otherwise would have. Nothing can beat that. Earthly woes are not the biggest issue. Our spiritual condition is the key. Faith is in our heart. No foe can touch that or take away God's gift. We will not perish.

With that focus we will endure. The text concludes with the promise, "By standing firm you will gain life." It's talking about eternal life with God in heaven. There no troubles exist. The opposition is gone. Sin and Satan will not be present.

But how can we stand firm? We are weak and sinful. That is true when speaking of ourselves, but God is not weak. He uses his almighty power in our behalf as he supports us and strengthens our faith through his Word and Sacraments. It is not up to you. Look to him alone. Fill yourself with the message that Jesus came, took your place in living in perfect obedience to God's commandments, achieving righteousness for you. He shouldered the burden of your sins and suffered the pains of hell on the cross as his Father forsook him. He paid the price in full. You are forgiven. You have the status of holy before God. You are welcome in his heaven. It has all been done by Jesus and given to you as a free gift.

That message not only saves you but it carries the power to overcome your natural resistance and to plant faith in your heart. If it can do that, it will also defeat the wiles of Satan, his helpers in the world, your own doubts and the weakness of your sinful nature and keep you in faith until the end comes. That is true whichever comes first: the end of the world or your personal end at death. God wants you his heaven so he will do everything to get you there. Believe him.

Don't let thoughts of the end or its conditions frighten you. Focus on the Savior and receive his comfort now and heaven forever. His goodness gives you something important to talk about whether you are facing death or living on earth for a long time. Walk close to him and live in peace.