

Countdown To The Kingdom

Mark 13;1-8

November 15, 2009

I.

The word "Gospel" comes from an Old English term dating back to the sixth century that means "good news." And we know from the Bible and Christian teachings that the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is the good news of salvation.

But where is the good news in today's reading? It sounded like a lot of bad news when we heard it a few moments ago. Jesus said that destruction was coming, false teachers would lead many astray, and there would be wars, earthquakes, and famines.

How can that be good news? On the surface it is not. But when we look at it in the context of Jesus' entire discourse to his disciples, of which today's reading is a small part, we can see signs of hope. If we look past the words of destruction and disaster and examine the larger picture, there is a sense of anticipation and optimism just over the horizon.

That is the purpose of today's Gospel. It's a story of bad news that precedes the good. And it is the first in a series of three weekly readings that shows the promise of God's grace.

But today, however, it is bad news. Today Jesus prophesied about looming disaster waiting to happen to the Jews, as well as trials and tribulations yet to happen as all humanity awaits the coming of God's kingdom. Next week we will reflect on how that kingdom already has arrived but is not yet complete. And in two weeks, on the first Sunday in Advent, we will anticipate the good news with Christ's coming again in glory to bring God's kingdom to fulfillment.

So now we are getting into biblical prophecy about things beyond our control, and we're moving away from biblical teachings intended to influence our choices and decisions. For the last few months we followed Jesus around Galilee and on his way to Jerusalem as he taught us to love God and our neighbor. Now we start to see why he calls us to do so.

And as background, today's reading from Mark is the first part of what is called the "Little Apocalypse." Similar stories are in Matthew and Luke. In all of them Jesus said a lot of things to his disciples that later were revealed to John in the Book of Revelation.

And this is our only chance during the entire year to consider the affliction and adversity that will accompany the end of history. While we do on occasion have readings from Revelation, they all describe visions of the realms of heaven rather than tribulations on earth.

II.

So let's set the scene. Jesus and his disciples were leaving the temple, and one of the disciples expressed wonderment at the magnificence of the temple and surrounding buildings. I imagine that people might have expressed similar sentiments as they walked past the World Trade Center prior to September 11. I will come back to this thought.

Jesus responded that all of the great buildings were slated for destruction. He said not one stone would be left upon another. That must have gotten the disciples' attention because shortly thereafter four of them asked Jesus privately to explain what was going to happen.

And because they all were sitting on the Mount of Olives across from the temple at the time, Jesus' response has become known as the Olivet Discourse. In its entirety it goes beyond the reading we heard today, and I will cover some of that additional material in order to give a more complete picture.

Jesus began, as I said earlier, by foretelling disaster for the Jews during the lifetimes of people then alive. As he continued in the verses just after today's readings he warned people to flee to the mountains and not even look back.

And Jesus' words eventually came to pass. Within four decades after the crucifixion the Temple was destroyed in a four year siege by the Roman army. The people of Jerusalem were cut off, and it was a time of starvation and great desolation within the city. Only those who actually did flee to the mountains survived.

Then Jesus moved from speaking of actual events in recorded history, and described cosmic events at the end of history. He said it would be a time when nation would rise against nation, and there would be earthquakes and famines, and Christians would be persecuted and despised.

He spoke of a great tribulation where all of humanity would have been destroyed if the Lord had not shortened the days of trial. And he warned of false prophets who would arise and perform miracles designed to lead believers astray.

Then he proclaimed that the sun would be darkened and the moon would not give light. And finally he concluded by saying that the Son of Man will appear in the clouds in great power and glory, and will send out his angels to gather believers from the ends of the earth, and then heaven and earth will pass away.

That all probably starts to sound familiar. Now we start to get the picture. We probably have heard apocalyptic language like that in a lot of end-time scenarios. And we don't have to go to the Book of Revelation to find it. Jesus explained a lot of it to his disciples beginning with today's reading.

III.

But, what does all this mean now? I began this sermon by wondering how the bad news we heard Jesus deliver today ever could be associated with good news. We now might have a better perspective on the answer.

The last words of today's reading said the time would be the beginning of the birth pangs. Paul referred to the same idea in the Book of Romans when he said that all of creation had been groaning in labor pains waiting for the children of God to be revealed (8:19-22). And next Sunday and the week after we will hear how that will happen.

So the purpose of today's Gospel is to set the stage for the larger picture of God's kingdom. And it also holds meaning for us now as we await that glorious time.

Jesus' words convey a message of faith, based in hope and perseverance. It is faith that out of trials, tribulations, and difficulties comes the sure and certain hope of God's peace, Christ's love, and our salvation. Sometimes our hopes come to pass in this world. Other hopes await the next. But hope in its deepest and richest form always is there. Worldly things come and go. Heavenly things are for eternity

Earlier I mentioned how the disciples marveled at the magnificence of the Temple in the same way as people once might have looked up in wonder at World Trade Center. And while I do not draw any theological parallels between the two situations, the worldly reality is that all of our buildings eventually will pass away, but our faith always will sustain us.

And in the same way Jesus warned people to flee to the high ground, to stay on their rooftops if they already were there, and to leave their homes and not turn back. I imagine that similar warnings were broadcast on the Mississippi coast in August of 2005. And again, while I do not

draw theological parallels between the two situations, I believe that many people turned to God in those dark days to find comfort and solace.

An old preacher once said that the hardest thing he had to do was witness to the presence of God and God's love when people were going through pain or tragedy, or as their hopes and dreams were falling apart, or as the world was crashing in upon them.

The best he could do, he said, was to help them understand today's broken world in the same context as Jesus described the desolation and tribulation in today's Gospel. And then he would try to hold out hope for them in the future, and he gave an example of one way he did that.

He told a story about a worship service he was conducting in a hospital that specialized in treating cancer patients. During the service he took a \$20 bill out of his pocket, and asked the patients who wanted it. Just about everybody's hand shot up. Then he took the bill and crumpled it up in his hand, and then asked who wanted it. The same hands went up. Then he took the bill, put it on the floor, stepped on it and ground his heel into it. He picked it up, asked now who wanted it, and still everybody's hand went up.

"This is an important lesson," the old preacher said. "No matter what happened to this bill, it's still worth \$20. It didn't lose any of its value." Then he said, "The same applies to you. No matter how much you think you have been crumpled up, stepped on, or ground into the floor, you have not lost any of your value. You are worth exactly as much to God today as you were the day you were born."

That applies to all of us. We all are of infinite value to God, and we all face the trials and tribulations of this world. And if we believe that God is with us as we struggle through them, then our faith is real even though we can fall into doubts.

IV.

Some people, especially historians, say that we are shaped by what we have experienced in the past. I have another theory. I say that as Christians we are shaped to a greater extent by what we believe about the future. We are sustained more by faith than by memories.

And if we have faith, if we believe that God is with us, then even if we flee to the mountains or are stuck on our rooftops he will be with us. If there are earthquakes, and famines, and even hurricanes, he will be with us. And even if we have come back from the hospital or doctor's office with fears about the future, he will be with us.

But we also know that faith is not an insurance policy against difficulties, and belief in the Gospel promise does not turn away all problems. Even living as Christians does not automatically resolve all of the hardships of life. But we do experience victory and we can persevere not because of the absence of problems, but because of the presence of faith.

As we close out this season of Pentecost this week and next, and as we prepare for the wonderful time of Advent, I pray that we can see beyond the temporary trials and tribulations of our lives, and look to the permanent things that are part of God's promises to us. *Amen.*