

On The Way

Luke 21:5-11, 20-22, 25-28

November 14, 2010

I.

Today's sermon will be a little shorter than usual because after I finish I would like to invite James DeDeaux to come forward and speak briefly with us as our stewardship campaign draws to a close.

Several things in life are quite fascinating, and prophecy can be one of them. Don't we wish we could know the future? What if we were able to know for sure what the stock market will do, or whether the Saints will win the Super Bowl, or who will win some hotly-contested election?

Wouldn't it be great if someone could tell us what's going to happen? But that's unrealistic because no one knows the future. All these writers, journalists, and television personalities who tell us what's coming don't really know. They're just giving their opinions, which are all different.

So, I guess we'll just have to muddle along, clueless and in the dark, being pulled here and there, not knowing what to expect or where to go for guidance. Perhaps the history and future of humanity is just a series of random chances. Nothing offers true wisdom or advice.

But wait! Perhaps we're looking for the wrong information in the wrong places. God told us a few things about what's going to happen. They're in the Bible. And that information is more important than the stock market or the Super Bowl.

God told us, for example, what's good and bad while we're alive, and we have some choices about those things. God also told us what will happen when we die, and again there are some choices to have been made before that time.

And then God told us he is going to return and rule the world, and drive out the evil around us. But we have no choices about any of that. We just have to be ready, and to have already made the right choices about those first two things.

II.

Today's readings begin a series of three weeks of teachings on God's prophetic plans for that last category at the end of the age for which we have no choices. We hear these stories every year at this time.

This week Jesus not only foretold imminent disaster for the Jews, which now has happened, but also described tribulations still in the future as all humanity awaits revelation of God's kingdom.

Next week, which is Christ the King Sunday, we recognize that the kingdom has arrived with Christ's birth, but that it also is a work in progress where bad things still happen to good people even though many parts of our lives are getting better. We acknowledge Jesus Christ as our King, which sets the stage for the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

And then in two weeks, the first Sunday in Advent, we anticipate the reality of that Lordship when Christ comes again in glory to bring God's kingdom to fulfillment.

So let's start with today's Old Testament reading from Isaiah. The prophet said God was going to create new heavens and a new earth, and former things could be forgotten. And people could rejoice forever because he was going to create Jerusalem as a joy.

But now let's hold that thought and go from the Old Testament to the Book of Revelation as it describes the end of time. The same idea is repeated. John said, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. [And] I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. The old order has passed away" (21:1-4).

And in between these two writings St. Paul in his letter to the Romans described the blessings Christ's reign would mean for believers when he said, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God" (8:18-19).

These words describe two great ages. There now is the quickening of God's kingdom for all who believe in Jesus Christ. And at the end of history God's judgment and glory will be revealed to everyone, believers or not. These are basic Christian doctrines that cannot be papered over or ignored through wishful thinking. Those who reject them do so at great peril to their eternal souls.

This leads to our Gospel reading. But first I briefly digress for some background. In Today's reading from Luke, Jesus' described supernatural signs of the end of the age. The Gospels of Mark and Matthew contain similar versions, and all three are called the "Little Apocalypse."

The Big Apocalypse, of course, is the Book of Revelation, which not only describes those very same signs but also tells how they eventually will be fulfilled. And there are two points here.

The first is that the Book of Revelation does not stand apart as some sort of strange or fanciful story. Instead it is corroborated by Jesus in the Gospels. Some say they believe in the Bible but not the Book of Revelation. I used to think that way. Now, however, I see that Revelation actually is the logical end of the trajectory that began with creation in the Book of Genesis.

The second point is that although these three Gospels were written by different people with different emphases, they are completely reliable. They all describe the same historic words of Jesus, and each independently supports the other.

And their prophetic images are consistent with other passages in the Old and New Testaments on the same subject. Therefore these prophecies should not be dismissed as fiction or myths. Jesus' words are true, and the basic events will happen.

III.

So let's look at those prophetic words and events. Jesus and his disciples were leaving the temple, and one of the disciples expressed wonder at the magnificence of the temple and surrounding buildings. I imagine people might have expressed similar sentiments as they walked past the World Trade Center prior to September 11.

Jesus responded that all the great buildings were slated for destruction. He said not one stone would be left upon another. And the disciples asked him to explain what was going to happen.

So Jesus began by foretelling disaster for the Jews during the lifetimes of people then alive. Jerusalem would be surrounded and desolation would be at hand. He warned people in the city to flee to the mountains and told those outside the city to stay away.

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. It was a time of starvation and great desolation within the city. Only those who actually did flee to the mountains survived. And the survivors were banished from Jerusalem and dispersed throughout the world.

Then Jesus moved from actual events in recorded history, and described cosmic events at the end of history. He said nation would rise against nation, and there would be earthquakes,

famines, and plagues. And he warned of false prophets who would arise and perform miracles designed to lead believers astray.

Finally he proclaimed that the sun would be darkened and the moon would not give light. And 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.

And remember, this all is found in the Gospels. We don't have to go to the Book of Revelation to read it. And biblical descriptions of these end-time apocalyptic events contain a consistent theme that might be unsettling. It is that God will suddenly crash into our lives whether we are ready or not. It frequently happened to the Hebrews in the Old Testament, and it will happen to us.

IV.

But is that a bad thing? Don't we want God in every aspect of our lives? I would like to suggest that what might seem to be unsettling news today is a prelude to reassuring news coming during the next two weeks.

The cataclysmic events that Luke described were characterized in Matthew (24:8) and Mark (13:8) as "the beginning of the birth pangs." And Paul said in Romans that "creation has been groaning in labor pains" (8:22).

So the purpose of today's Gospel really is to set the stage for the larger picture of God's kingdom. God's kingdom is growing in the womb now, so to speak. And we don't know the details about when this new era will fully arrive, but there is no doubt that it is irrevocably on the way.

Jesus' words, although alarming to some, speak to others of faith, based in hope and perseverance. It is faith that from 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 always is there.

Historians sometimes say that we are shaped by what we have experienced in the past. The Bible offers another theory. It holds that as Christians we are shaped to a greater extent by what we believe about the future. We are sustained by faith rather than by memories.

And if we have faith, if we believe that God is with us, then even if we flee to the mountains like those early Jews, he will be with us. If there are earthquakes, and famines, and even hurricanes, he will be with us. Whatever difficulties beset us in the darkness can be overcome by the light of Christ's love and salvation.

As we close out the season of Pentecost this week and next, and as we prepare for the wonderful time of Advent in two weeks, I pray that we look beyond the temporary trials of our lives, and consider the permanent things that are part of God's promises to us. And even though his glory on earth still is in the future, it comes nearer each day and calls us to trust in him. *Amen.*