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Pentecost 26 B, November 17, 2024

What the future holds

Mark 13: 1 – 13 and/or Memorize: Mark 13: 10

Jesus and the disciples are leaving the temple. One of them remarks about what a magnificent edifice it is. This was the third go-round for the Jerusalem temple: the first having been planned by King David and constructed by his son, Solomon. It was exquisite in every way possible. Sadly, that structure had been leveled by King Nebuchadnezzar, when the nation was carried off into exile in Babylon.

Once God's people were allowed to return to their homeland, the second temple was built. Unfortunately, it paled in comparison to the original. Folks were even embarrassed by it, but that embarrassment did not lead them to do anything about this, even though they knew about the grandeur of the former temple. Although they felt that way about it for almost 500 years, they still used it as the center of Jewish worship.

Now, along came the Romans, and at the pleasure of Caesar, Herod the Great was installed as king in Israel. He knew that the temple was not all the Jewish people wished it were. So, in an effort to curry favor with the people, but at the same time leave a monument to his rule, he embarked on a temple renovation and expansion project that would make it bigger and better than it had been.

His most notable contribution was the magnificent stone work of the temple platform that was greatly enlarged. It was this temple that the disciples were speaking of with much admiration. It was beautiful.

But as they were reflecting on the beauty and magnificence of it, Jesus delivers an incredible statement to them out of the blue: "Not one stone will be left on another; everyone will be thrown down." Quite the perspective when you realize that the stones He was talking about were the size of a minivan. With our benefit of hindsight, we know He was right.

The temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. by the Romans in response to a rebellion, which was called the first Jewish – Roman war. Some also suggest, it was part of a plot by the then Roman Governor to plunder the temple to add to the treasury on behalf of Rome.

Jesus and his friends continued to walk and talk together, as they made their way across the valley and finally rested in one of their old haunts on the Mount of Olives. Off in the distance, the temple dome dominated the landscape, and the site prompted the conversation to continue that had begun with Jesus' bold prophecy.

Some of the disciples were very concerned about what He had said. They approached him privately and asked, "Tell us when this will be, this 'not one stone upon another' event that you have now revealed to us and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?"

It's a fair question, there is after all, something fascinating about prophecy. All of us wish we had a glimpse of the future. Now, one of those television preachers was talking about a new book he had just written, that supposedly explained everything anyone needed to know about the coming of Jesus and the end of all time.

He was talking about his book, proclaiming that you must own it in order for it to give you insight into the end of the world. How could you go wrong, he explained, for it would only cost you \$14.95 to acquire all this wisdom and then reap the benefit of his wisdom. He also warned that if you failed to make this purchase, you would not survive the coming terrors unless you had purchased this book. Notice, he didn't say anything about reading it. Just the purchase of the book would impart all his wisdom.

A biblical commentator was so intrigued he called the number and suggested to the poor operator that if this preacher really thought this was so vital to the survival of the people, and the end was so near, he wondered if this author should be giving the book away! As he explained, "After all, if it's all coming to an end, he won't need the money; he would certainly be performing a community service.

Not at all amused, the operator replied, "Sorry, sir, but I don't know much about theology." To which the commentator quickly responded, "Neither does the writer of the book you're selling."

Interestingly enough, there are many people who like to make predictions about the future. Not surprisingly, a lot of them don't work out very well.

Frank Knox, the Secretary of the Navy on December 4, 1941 said: "Whatever happens, the U.S. Navy is not going to be caught napping." Three days later the Kingdom of Japan would launch a sneak attack on the Navel fleet and air bases in the Hawaiian Island, bringing the United States into World War II .

Although a recession had begun in August of 1929, the market rebounded by mid – October, which led economist Irving Fischer on October 16, 1929 to announce: "Stocks have reached what looks like a permanently high plateau." The stock market collapsed on October 29, 1929.

Thomas Watson, IBM chairman in 1943 announced: "I think there is a world market for maybe five computers." Some of us might wish that he had been correct, based on the problems we've had with a computer.

In 1962, Decca Records rejected a request for a recording contract with a group called The Beatles. They said, "We don't like their sound. Groups of guitars are on the way out." Two years later, the Beatles would appear on the Ed Sullivan Show to an audience of 73 million viewers, the largest ever audience for that time, setting off Beatlemania. Its impact rippled through the world.

So, what does Jesus say about what we're going to face? Wars, earthquakes, famines, pestilence, and all those other nasty things. Yes, we can see all those things happening, some of them all too often, even though we would rather not. We don't need any apocalyptic visions of flaming catastrophe to understand nasty. The question is, how can we handle nasty?

Jesus offers us some advice: "Beware that no one leads you astray." When life is falling apart, and we all know that it sometimes is going to happen, even to the best of us, when it seems as though one stone is crashing down upon another, we are liable to listen to any voice that promises to help. The words from Jesus are, "Be careful." There are wolves out there in sheep's clothing, seeking to devour you.

But Jesus doesn't leave us with just the words, "Be careful." He says, what strikes me as incredibly comforting words, "But this is only the first of the birth pains, with more to come." Indeed, those of us who are in Christ, understand this, even if we forget it at trying moments.

Any of us who have gone through birth, both those having the baby, and those standing by them, know that birth is a painful process, for mother, child and all who are participants in it. Transitions are like that, they are painful. But once again, anyone who has had a baby knows the blessing that awaits, when the process is complete. What sustains us in the dark moments of life is our faith.

Have you ever heard anyone say, "I would never have made it without my faith?" I suspect you may have personally said it or heard it more times than you can count. And where is that faith nurtured and grown? Faith is grown in the very gift that God gave us; it is nurtured in the church.

History offers, no parallel to the church. When the world is out of joint, when people's minds are distorted, their hearts are failing them for fear, when it seems as though not one stone is left on another, the thing of supreme importance is the living church, with all of her sanctuaries of worship and her avenues of service.

It is in the living church, where Christ is alive among the people, that they come to have their faith strengthened, their thoughts clarified, their ideas uplifted, their conditions and their character created. In an age when communities of all kinds are crumbling and individualism is the prevailing theology we can look for one thing. Only the church offers a community that was there before any of us were born, that will be here after all of us die and that binds us to one another because it binds us to Christ."

So, we can ask, "What does the future hold?" We can also answer that question by the grace of God, in the midst of everything else in all creation there is one sure thing: There is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God. This is exactly why the church exists in this world, to remind us to continue to carry on that mystery of faith, so that all people may come to know and believe that truth, that God's love will prevail over everything else.

Count me in: Because you know that the future is in God's hands, how will help others to not be fearful?