

SERMON

Pastor Cris Frigm

This feels like one of those times where I say, “The Gospel of the Lord.” You say, “Praise to you, O Christ.” And I should ask, “are you sure?” Are you sure this is good news for which we should praise Christ our Savior? Well, of course it is because the bulletin said so. It’s right there in black and white... “The Holy Gospel” “The Gospel of the Lord.”

But it sure doesn’t feel like it by the time we get to the end. We have nations rising against nations; earthquakes, famines, and plagues...but even before that, arrests and persecutions. There’s a little bit of hope that the Spirit will give us the words to testify. But then we’re told that we have to **endure** if we want to gain life with God.

I don’t know about you, but anytime the good news of God’s salvation is couched in the promise that “not a hair of your head will perish” I get just a little bit nervous...or downright terrified that I’ve done something really wrong.

Anytime we come across these words of Jesus – and there are variations of this message in all four Gospels, it’s a good idea to take a step back and dig deeply into what Jesus was trying to get across. When we do that, we don’t miss what might be right in front of us. We see what Jesus wants us to see. Hopefully, we can be a little more confident that we have, in fact, heard good news.

I think this is also a good time to pay careful attention to the three audiences that are hearing these words: one, the disciples in Jerusalem in the timeline of the story being shared; two, the community that was hearing the Gospel of Luke in the years not too long after Jesus’ ascension; and three, you and me, right now.

For the disciples standing with Jesus in the temple – or maybe just outside the temple, it was a direct warning to what they would experience as they continued down the path of discipleship. Keep in mind, that this is still in the midst of the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities. We heard a bit about that last week. Since his conflict with the Sadducees, he has gone on to denounce the scribes and lift up the widow who gave a much more significant offering to the temple than all those rich people, the ones who had financed the beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God. Or maybe they were really dedicated to showing off their wealth to the world.

For that first audience, for the disciples, the message is clear...the finery of the temple isn’t a testament to God’s love and grace. What they see in the temple stones isn’t what matters. **They** will be the testimony to God’s love and grace. The world will reject the message of the cross in favor of the pretty decorations and persecute those who turn from worldly power to be centered in love and mercy.

The first hearers of Luke's Gospel are those who have lived through the end of the temple that the disciples were praising. They saw the Romans destroy the temple in the year 70 so that the words that Jesus spoke have already come true. The world of that early church, wherever it was actually located was one in which the message of the cross stands in stark contrast to the power being wielded around them – by both the Romans and the Jews.

That community needed to hear that they were not alone, that the destruction they had experienced...the kingdom against kingdom violence they had lived through is not a sign that they have been abandoned by God. They had seen so much destruction and these words were a reminder to look for what God was doing in the midst of their lived experience. As their lives shifted away from the temple-centered presence of God to an Emmanuel-God-among-us reality, they had to look out for where God would show up in the destruction, in the uneasiness, in the hatred.

Which brings us to today. I imagine when I heard these words in my younger days...way back in the last century...they probably struck me differently than they do now. I was a child of the cold war. I didn't have the "huddle under your desk drill" anymore...because we figured out that wouldn't work and that the world wouldn't survive a third world war between superpowers. As I was getting ready to finish high school, the Berlin Wall came down. I visited the Soviet Union on a college choir tour in June of 1991 as that country became more and more open but still had the signs of a communist oligarchy. And then, just a few months later, it collapsed and we entered a new era. The threat of global thermal nuclear war seemed to dissipate just a bit and we celebrated.

We thought there would be a new measure of peace. But there hasn't been. Nations still rise against nations. Earthquakes continue. We've had a new plague. The new world order seems to be one of chaos and polarization. And some are out there proclaiming...still...that the end is near and Jesus is coming. That this is the time for which we were waiting for Jesus to return.

That message is usually accompanied with a healthy dose of judgment and exhortation to repent and turn away from the ways of the world for some ideological purity formed from selective biblical literalism.

But that's not what Jesus was doing in the temple sometime in the first fifty years of the common era. The disciples "asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?"⁸ And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray, for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them."

Watch, Jesus says. Pay attention. Consider. That Greek word for “beware” carries all kinds of nuance about seeing what we’re supposed to see. Seeing so that we can respond to what is happening.

The temple was going to be destroyed – not just because of a political rebellion, but because the presence of God in the world was about to be entirely different than it had been. The presence of God was no longer to be a geographic place of sacrifice but was now to be the reality of the cross and resurrection alive in every fiber of our being. God had become one of us so that we would no longer try to contain God within a religious construct...but would **see** God in the midst of the struggles happening all around us.

“Pay attention to what God is doing,” Jesus says. Knowing that he was about to go to a cross and these very disciples were going to witness that; knowing that the readers of the Gospel had seen the temple itself be destroyed as they tried to live a new way of discipleship.

Pay attention to what God is doing in our lives as we find ways to be church in a world that doesn’t default to a casual association with faith as a societal expectation. You could make an argument that Jesus was speaking against the entire construct we have made around practicing our faith – that the temple stones that were torn down are no different than the bricks and altars we’ve rebuilt in the generations since. That the very construct of “church” is no longer necessary.

You could make that argument...but I won’t. Buildings still matter. A place to **be** still matters. But it is a place to **do**. It is a place where we come together to pay attention to what God is doing in love. It’s a place where we learn about what is happening in the world and we witness to what God is doing.

The “dreadful portents and great signs from heaven” are not a call to run away from the world and get right with God. They are a call to action, a call to be church for the world; to love more intentionally, to give more generously, to care more deeply. It’s a call to pay attention. It’s a call we have to answer. Amen.