

Second Last Sunday

November 15, 2009

Sermon Text: Mark 13:1-13

Sermon Title: "A Glimpse of the End"

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our heavenly Father and from our Lord and coming King, Jesus Christ, Amen. Our text for the Second Last Lord's Day of the Christian Year is taken from the Gospel reading for this morning, where Mark records the following words of our Lord to His disciples:

"See that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray."

This is our text.

The sky is falling! The sky is falling! Watch out, the end of the world is near! Look out!

How often do we spend time watching, looking and searching for signs as to when Christ our Lord will reappear in clouds of glory? It's only natural for us to wonder when the end of this world will come and the final judgment will take place, isn't it?

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus gives us a peek into the crystal ball—a glimpse of the end, if you will—so that we might be prepared when that glorious day finally does arrive. In the midst of all this seeking, looking and watching, Jesus has a few observations of His own as we begin to examine our text for this morning.

The gospel lesson for this morning picks up right where last week's reading left off. If you weren't here last Sunday, that's OK. I'll fill you in. Our text revolves around acts of "seeing" as the story line moves from the immediate context of where Jesus observes a poor widow giving all out of her poverty, in contrast with the rich who gave from plenty. Jesus' "little revelation" begins as the disciples change the topic of conversation by saying in verse one:

"Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!"

He marvels now, over the sight of the impressive stones and buildings of the temple area. Jesus' attention has been shifted from spiritual quality to the disciples' view of material quantity. Jesus' reply is that what you see is "here today and gone tomorrow". That particular vision for the sacred temple seems difficult to believe for the disciples, who ask the Lord to give them signs and even a timetable for when these events will occur. Twice Jesus replies with "look out" statements. "Look out," He says, for those who would give dates and read signs in misleading ways. Jesus suggests that the focus shouldn't be so much on the end of time itself as on our faithfulness as we await and approach His coming for us, whenever that is. Secondly, "Look out," He says, lest you be overwhelmed by the trials that come upon your Christian witness. Rather, look up! As you endure, you'll be enabled by the Holy Spirit and be given the salvation reserved for the faithful. Your future is assured through your day-by-day walk with Jesus.

And so, as we examine our text, let us take a closer look at what Jesus tells His disciples and us as we are to beware, to keep watch and to look out. First, Jesus warns them in verses 5 and 6 saying:

"See that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name saying 'I am he.'"

How many false messiahs have arisen through the years? Mohammed, the founder of Islam and the Muslim faith, claimed to be the last of a string of prophets from Abraham through Jesus. His way, and not Jesus' way was the way to salvation, or so he claimed. And today we see millions upon millions of people in the world who have been led astray by this counterfeit "prophet" and Savior of the world. Others have come and gone, like the Rev. Sun Yung Moon and the Rev. Jim Jones, who are just two fake Saviors from a long line of false Messiahs and who led people astray from the true message of Jesus Christ and Christianity throughout the years.

In the next verse He tells the disciples once again to look out as He says:

"And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet."

The disciples had asked for signs, but Jesus also warns them and us that we shouldn't misread the signs that we see and hear. Nearly a century ago people thought that World War I was the "war to end all wars", and that the end of the world was near. But look what has happened. The United States alone has fought not only in World War I, but in World War II, Korean, Vietnam, Grenada, Iraq and Afghanistan. That's not counting the other nations who have fought civil wars, wars against neighbors, wars in the Middle East, and other kinds of battles, skirmishes and wars that have been fought all across the globe. We are tempted to look for signs, to set

timetables like the disciples wanted when they asked Jesus the same thing in our text. We hear of wars and rumors of wars, we see battles that are being fought around us, and we feel like giving into despair, we feel like the end is near, and we grow impatient with God for not coming sooner than later.

Jesus goes on to say in the next verse of our text:

“There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains.”

My brothers and sisters in Christ, have you seen the commercials and ads on TV for the movie “2012”? If I understand the premise or plot for the movie correctly, the end of the world is supposed to happen three years from now because the ancient Mayans had figured their calendar to this point in the future. I don’t know why they stopped figuring it out up to that time. Maybe they figured it was far enough ahead and someone else could work on it later. Maybe the person doing the work or the king who ordered the work to be done died, and so they gave up. All I know is, that 2012 will come and go without all of the disasters, earthquakes, etc. that the movie portrays.

How can I be so sure? Because Jesus warned us that this would happen. How many people were absolutely positive that Y2K was going to be the end of the world? People of faith predicted that when the computers switched from 1999 over to 2000, they would crash and mass chaos would ensue, didn’t they? And if that wasn’t enough, there have been others who predicted that the world would end in 1984. For those of you like me who are old enough to remember, it was the first time that all nine of the planets would be in conjunction since the days of the birth of Jesus Christ.

The authors of the “Left Behind” series of fictional books also wrote a non-fiction book in which they asked the question: “Are We Living In the End Times?” Now they don’t come out and make an absolute prediction as to a date and time for Christ’s return, but they have come to the same conclusion: the end is near. But they, like others before them, are looking at the wrong things that Jesus has to say in this passage and in others. When Jesus tells us to watch, to look out, and everything else that He says here, we’re not supposed to be sitting on the rooftops waiting impatiently for Christ’s return. Martin Luther once said “If I knew for certain that Jesus was coming back tomorrow, I’d plant an apple tree today”. Are we living in the end times? Of course we are! But then, we have been living in the end times ever since Jesus Christ our Lord ascended into heaven to intercede on our behalf nearly 2000 years ago. The point of this particular lesson isn’t to watch and wait for the end, but Jesus encouragement to us to endure to the end.

People loved by God, the last five verses of our text urge the hearers to “look out” for themselves. Persecutions in the form of arrest, accusation, physical abuse, and betrayal will come to the Christian witness. After all, who wants to be told that they are sinful and unclean? The world tries to convince us that if we are living sinful and unrepentant lives, then how dare you “judge” me by calling a sin a sin? The devil tries to convince us that “what’s wrong for you might be right for me”. And churches and Christians who point out what the Bible says are shunned, avoided and otherwise called “intolerant, homophobic, misogynistic” bigots or worse. But Jesus promises us that we will be guided by the Spirit who will help us to endure all sorts of trials and tribulations.

What we see and do today has a way of shaping our future. Jesus, the master teacher, persisted in the monumental task of lifting the eyes of His willing, but often a little dense, followers. While they are impressed by human achievements, Jesus sets their and our sights upon spiritual realities. The spiritual truths are what will endure to the end even after massive towers and impressive structures are long gone. Even though we face tough challenges, let us boldly go forth with the confidence that the Spirit will enable us—through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord—to face His mission in spite of persecutions, political correctness and the threat of punishment. And while the Spirit stands with us now, we have the greater joy of having Jesus standing with us on the last day regardless of when it will happen. Thank God He has done this for Jesus’ sake, Amen. And now the peace of God...