

First Sunday of Advent
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St. Thomas Episcopal Church

28 November 2021

Readings:

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

For several Sundays before Christ the King Sunday last week, we worked our way through the details of one of Jesus' visits to the Temple in Jerusalem. We followed along in Jesus' story as he was confronted by Temple leaders, and as he sat across from the treasury and commented to his disciples after the widow dropped in her two small coins in the offering trumpet. We read Jesus' conversation with his disciples regarding the coming destruction of the Temple and even measured off the size of the largest stone still found in the Western Wall Tunnel in Jerusalem.

Today's reading from Luke drops us back into this same conversation Jesus was having with his disciples as they left the Temple. While this movement we've gone through over these past weeks might seem odd – to go from spending weeks focused on this one Temple visit – to last week reading about Jesus being questioned by Pontius Pilot – and now returning to this same conversation between Jesus and his disciples outside the Temple; but there is a purpose to this movement.

During this conversation, Jesus was trying to prepare his disciples for what was coming. He knew that soon, they would also be standing before counsels, and be called on to give an account of their faith. But like Joshua asking the angel whose side he was on (Joshua 5:13-15), the disciples asked questions of immediate concern to their human perception. Instead of really hearing Jesus and the point he was making, the disciples were distracted by the concerns that came immediately to their hearts and minds.

Jesus' disciples immediately moved to asking when this time would come and what signs would precede it. Each remembrance of this conversation includes a statement like Luke 21:7 when the disciples responded, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" (Luke 21:7).

In Luke 21:8 Jesus responded to their question about the time and the signs by saying, "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." Jesus then told his followers about the trials they would face, and he promised to be with them through them all. Just as when the angel skipped over Joshua's question and moved on to the issue of Joshua's reverence toward God, so Jesus moved past the disciples' concerns about timing and signs to what was truly important in preparing them for these coming events.

Jesus told his disciples, “This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.” (Luke 21:13-15)

The disciples asking about the timing of these coming events was a completely reasonable question when we think about Jesus’ words from a human perspective. Very often, the amount of time you have to prepare for something is even more important than what resources you have available to you.

And before this conversation outside the Temple, Jesus had spoken a great deal about the timing of being prepared, saying things like ‘keep awake-for you do not know when the master of the house will come...or else he may find you asleep when he comes.’ (Mark 13:35). And Jesus had shared parables about timing and being prepared such as the story about the ‘ten bridesmaids’ with five who were kept out of the wedding banquet because they were not prepared for the master’s arrival (Matthew 25:1-13).

Instead of responding to the disciples’ immediate question, Jesus drew their focus back to what was truly important for them to know. The disciples asked Jesus, ‘How much time do we have before this happens?’ and Jesus instead answered with what they needed to do to be prepared at any moment. Jesus answered, you prepare by drawing near to me and by trusting that I will guide you through the difficult moments. Jesus responded by saying, you won’t need to struggle to know the right thing to do; if you are rightly focused on me and have not let yourself be led astray – you will have everything you need to be prepared for each day, no matter what it holds.

The disciples wanted to know how to prepare themselves for the coming crisis Jesus was describing, as though they could be strong enough, or plan well-enough, to face these times under their own strength. Jesus said, you will persevere only through hiding yourself in me. You will endure through the strength of my Spirit working in you, to guide you and to guard you from being overwhelmed and overcome.

In reading Luke 21 we gain a sense of the two different prophetic time aspects Jesus was referencing. We understand his prophecy about the destruction of the Temple, and we know the history of this event, but we also sense there is a larger event to come that will shake not just a city, but the whole of creation. John’s book detailing Jesus’ revelation to him about these end times would later provide a deeper explanation for this. This larger event is, in fact, one of the reasons we celebrate Advent, to mark and remember and watch for this Second Coming of Christ.

While we celebrate this moment, we cannot avoid acknowledging that the description of it opens doors for all kinds of anxiety. We would be hard-pressed to

find a situation that leaves us feeling more out of control and vulnerable than the events Luke described in today's reading. And not forgetting that Luke says clearly, "People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the power of the heavens will be shaken" (Luke 21: 26).

But note that Luke doesn't say 'all people' when describing this scene. Luke wrote that some would stand up, instead of fainting, that some would raise their heads in hopeful expectation of their redemption, rather than being filled with fear. Luke wrote that this moment would come upon all who live on the earth; some will see a moment of death and destruction, where others will see the fulfillment of their redemption.

It seems that every time the world becomes unsettled, there are those who grab hold of Jesus' prophetic words and use them to stir anxiety, even in believers when they are able to. I listened to a teaching recently where the preacher described our current time as 'the last days of the last days.' Apparently just saying 'last days' is no longer enough to get people to buy a book or tune in to a podcast.

I will grant that we are living through unusual times right now. There are plenty of things that seem unsettled and out of control. But these are the times when we need to be thoughtful about conversations like the one Jesus had with his disciples outside the Temple when he spoke the words of prophecy we read today.

Jesus taught his disciples that being faithful during unsettling times meant drawing near to him and trusting in his love and strength and guidance. Scripture gives us example after example of what it means to do this. From the story of Peter walking on water until he took his eyes off Jesus, to Jesus calming the storm while admonishing the panicked disciples for their lack of faith, to Jesus telling Thomas to put his hand in his side. In each of these moments, Scripture teaches us to get our eyes off the world and to draw near to God.

The real question is whether we will discipline ourselves to do so. The world says you need to watch the news to be prepared; Jesus said we are to listen to his teachings to be prepared. Which voice will we listen to? The world says it is possible for us to be prepared for crisis by reading apocalyptic authors and buying 'end of the world' stuff. Jesus said, 'Watch and pray and listen to my voice. I am the Good Shepherd who will lead my people into green pastures.' Who are we listening to in order to read the signs of the times - the world or Jesus?

It takes faith and discipline to get up and spend the first moments of your day in prayer and reading Scripture when the world is throwing a tantrum to distract your attention from God. Jesus said, don't listen to those who try to distract you from drawing near to God, even when it is your own anxiety trying to get the upper hand. The more confused the world becomes, the more we need to open God's Word and ask our Father to give us ears to hear and hearts to obey. Amen.