

Advent 1 – Year C

Just two weeks ago, we heard Mark’s version of this same gospel passage we have today from Luke. Remember with me that Jesus and the disciples were just coming out of the temple, and some were remarking on how beautiful and big the temple was. Luke has the same lead-in to what we hear in today’s gospel. Earlier in the chapter, Luke writes: “When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, ‘As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.’” And, as we heard in Mark’s version, the disciples again ask “When will this be – and what are the signs?” And after many other descriptions of the terrors and strife to come, including the persecution the disciples can expect, we get to the verses that are our Gospel passage for today.

Why do they all include it? The temple had already been destroyed... The people first hearing this story, no matter from which evangelist’s pen, were living in a time when they were experiencing the very things Jesus was “predicting” in the story. So this story is here, not as a warning about the end of time, but as assurance to the early believers that they will get through all of it. Luke writes earlier in this chapter, “By your endurance you will gain your souls.” The thing to be afraid of, Jesus is telling us, is not the destruction of our place of worship, or the other trappings of faith. We can withstand natural disasters and wars. What we need to be afraid of losing is *our faith* itself. What we need to worry about losing is our faith.

Our faith, fundamentally, is built on the belief that the all-loving God took flesh, became incarnate, in Jesus the Christ. “The Word was with God, and the Word *was* God. And the Word took flesh and dwelt among us.” And Jesus came preaching, from the beginning of his public life, that the kingdom, the reign of God was here with us. His very name, Emmanuel, means “God with us!” Jesus showed us a God of mercy, who eats with sinners and tax collectors and women, who holds children close. Jesus told us what is at the heart of God in the parable of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. Jesus gave us only one law – to love one another as we are loved by God.

That is our faith. And that is what we should worry about losing – not buildings or possessions or status or wealth, but our very faith.

But why would our faith be at risk, you ask? And I will say, because that belief is what some would seek to destroy. And there is one thing that can destroy it – and that is fear.

If I can convince you that your comfortable way of life is going to be lost if you let too many people into this country, I can make you afraid of those others, I can make you afraid of losing what you have. If I can make you think that everyone who doesn't look like most of the people in this church is suspect, so that you begin to be afraid of them, I can make you afraid of letting strangers come too close, especially strangers who don't look like you. If I tell you, again and again, that the "other" – other race, other color, other nationality, other religion, - is out to get you, or doesn't have your values, or wants to take what you have – then I can make you start to mistrust "the other" – make you fear-full, and get you to be driven by that fear.

And if I am driven by fear, then the good news, the gospel, the belief and practice of the values of Jesus, go by the wayside. My fear can make me let go of my faith.

About five months ago, speaking from this pulpit, I quoted something from the Washington Post. A well-paid lobbyist was cited there as saying: "There are only two engines that drive Washington: One is greed, and the other is fear." I made the connection then that these two engines can also drive each of us. But what I hadn't come to yet then, was that these are the very things that can cost us our faith. Fear and greed. If I hold onto fear and greed, I cannot simultaneously hold onto a faith based on the gospel. I cannot, at one and the same time, believe that all people are my neighbors – as Jesus proclaimed in the story of the Good Samaritan – and then look at an immigrant as my enemy, someone to make fun of, to call names, to send back to the horrible conditions she came from.

Jesus tells us to be alert, to be watchful – I think what we have to be watchful for are the things, the people, the attitudes that incite us to fear and greed. The “signs” that Jesus points out – the distress of nations, the roaring of the sea, the earthquakes and famines, nation waging war against nation – they were happening in Jesus’s time, and in our time, and in all the times in between. Remember that those are the signs the Jesus calls the “birthpangs” in Mark’s gospel. Those things will not destroy us. But fear that leads us to adopt policies and laws and attitudes that are antithetical to the gospel, that will destroy our very souls.

Our country is mourning the death of George H. W. Bush. Even those who disagreed with his politics found him to be a man of integrity. I went back to his nomination acceptance speech and found two things there that I think we could profit from hearing again this morning. Then candidate Bush said, “I am guided by certain traditions. One is that there's a God, and He is good and His love, while free, has a self-imposed cost: We must be good to one another.” Later in the same speech he said, “Where is it written that we must act if we do not care, as if we are not moved? Well, I am moved. I want a kinder and gentler nation.” As an Episcopalian, President Bush bound himself to the same baptismal covenant as we have, and I think it showed in those words.

We are fortunate, perhaps, that for us in the northern hemisphere Advent comes when we’re moving into the darkest of days. It can certainly feel like we are living in dark times. Perhaps Advent can help lead us into focusing on the light – on being watchful for daybreak, watchful for all the ways the kingdom of God is near - indeed is here, if only we have eyes to see.

Open our eyes, O God – and keep us from fear.
Amen.

- [Jeremiah 33:14-16](#)
- [1 Thessalonians 3:9-13](#)
- [Luke 21:25-36](#)
- [Psalm 25:1-9](#)