

The God Who Has Taken Everything Into Account

The Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Daniel 12:1-3; Psalm 16;
Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13:1-8

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

How on earth are we to understand that reading from the Gospel this morning? What can it possibly be taken to mean? You and I know only too well how this can be taken – as a warning of dreadful times when the earth will be brought to an end and the righteous saved and the wicked eternally damned.

This is the sort of cataclysmic ending that is often expressed in much less religious terms in some popular disaster movies, where a rogue comet is hurtling towards the Earth to destroy it, or a huge earthquake pulls down massive buildings. Or in the more frantic and fundamentalist approach, we can read it in a series of novels like the Left Behind series. This morning's gospel is frequently used in that fashion.

But is that really what Jesus is getting at? Or does the gospel have quite a different intent? You see, I think there is some very good news indeed in the gospel we heard read this morning, but it is good news that might easily be overlooked. So, let's look more closely to see what's happening.

Jesus is leaving the temple when one of the disciples comments on the magnificence of the whole structure. And truly magnificent it was. (And what's left of it still is.) It was huge. It looked as though it would last forever. Would you believe that some of the stones were 14 feet long and 18 feet wide? That temple took 46 years to build, and it became the center of life for the nation and the people. The Temple was the only place where sacrifice might be made for the atonement of the sins of individuals and the collective sins of the nation. Here individual and state were made righteous. Nearly everyone tried to make at least one journey to the Temple during their lifetime. To say the Temple would cease to exist, that it would be destroyed, was totally unthinkable.

I'm not sure that we can grasp how devastating the destruction of the Temple would be. It would throw the life of the people, and the nation, into chaos. While we can't imagine the magnitude of the impact of the destruction of the Temple, we do know what it is to be impacted by terrible and unexpected destruction of public buildings. The first painful lesson we learned was the Alfred P. Murrah building in Oklahoma City, brought down by one of our own, turned domestic terrorist. Then, if you remember, it was a bomb in the underground parking garage at the World Trade Center. And finally, the horrific destruction of the Twin Towers on 9/11. Those events have changed us, and we know there is no going back. But our question is, I think, the disciples' question: Where on earth is God in all of this? And what on earth does a gospel reading like this morning's have to tell us?

It's interesting, don't you think, that after Jesus makes his comment about the destruction of the Temple, there's no further discussion, either by Jesus or the disciples, until they are all sitting on the Mount of Olives. Perhaps it was the fact that they were directly across the valley from the Temple that brought the subject up again. And the four disciples who approach Him, the inner circle, now openly express their anxiety: If the Temple is to be destroyed, when is it going to happen? And perhaps more importantly, will they get any warning; will they get any sign of the forthcoming destruction? After all, who wouldn't want to be prepared should that event occur? For the disciples – indeed, for all of the people of that time – the destruction of the Temple would mean the end of Israel. Why? Because the temple could only be destroyed if God had abandoned it. And, if God had abandoned the Temple, then He most certainly had abandoned the chosen people. Little wonder the disciples were concerned. Now for you and me, it doesn't a great stretch of the imagination to realize that we too harbor some very real concerns about the possibility of our world, and our society, coming to an end.

In its most fanciful form, this concern is exhibited by those who choose to announce the end of the world. And if there aren't any around announcing it, we can always count on the Midnight Inquirer to have an article about it coming. Every year some group or another is announcing the end is near and they retreat to someplace they see as a “sacred” place to faithfully await the cataclysmic event that will wipe out everybody else and end in their own salvation.

Of course, religious enthusiasts aren't the only messengers of doom who warn of the coming end; they are legion! There's global warming, there's pollution, there's bird flu – the procession is endless. Now don't mistake me, I'm not saying that these events are fantasy. What I am saying is that events such as that, and warnings that they provoke, are part of our everyday life and cause us, when they arise, considerable anxiety.

And it is precisely at that point that Jesus makes His response to the disciples. “Beware,” Jesus warns them, “that no one leads you astray.” There are so many different voices abroad in the world – we've heard them. “God is dead” some say. “The church is dying” others cry. “Armageddon is about to happen in the Middle East; let's do all we can to hasten things along and help the coming of the Lord,” is the proclamation of still others. It all gets to be bewildering, leaving us to wonder to which voice are we to attend?

The subtle truth is, first, Jesus is the One to whom we should listen. And there's the catch. Jesus gives us no clue as to what to look for to distinguish between the true message and the false. No definite instruction is given, but notice what's happened: Jesus has called the disciples aside. These are the people to whom all authority will be given to continue His ministry and His mission, after His death and resurrection. That group will lay the foundation and groundwork for an understanding of Jesus' teaching and how to interpret scripture.

You'll notice, I hope, that your pastors and vicars are held accountable through seminary, Synod, and congregation, to preach and teach what is in accord with that tradition. There's a standard and a test provided for us. And even you, my friends, are included in this when you're called to study scripture daily, to attend worship, and participate in educational programs, for it's there that we find support and guidance and understanding as to how we might interpret scripture.

Then, in place of a timetable, instead of disclosing a sign, Jesus tells the disciples to observe the events of the world as it develops and grows, and changes. There are no signs, is what Jesus is telling them. Wars, earthquakes, famines, disasters, terrorists, bombings, plagues, hurricanes, tornados, all these, says Jesus, are nothing more than birth pangs. The natural pains experienced by a world as it proceeds to that day which no one, not even Jesus, knows. That time is firmly in God's control. He is the future, and the future is His!

It's here that we suddenly realize what's going on, at least as far as the gospel writer has set it up. Jesus is sitting across the valley, opposite the Temple, the focal point of God's saving activity in the world. But that temple is to be destroyed. So what's left? Why Jesus, the Christ, who shortly will be put to death by a world that has succumbed to the delusion that it is in control. Jesus will die. But He will also rise from the dead. That death, accompanied by the tearing of the temple curtain, followed in a few years by the actual destruction of the temple itself, will open the way to a new Christian community. The new locus of faith will not be in the temple, but in Christ Jesus, and Him raised from the dead.

Yes there will be human devastation and natural disasters, but all is accounted for in God's plan of salvation. While all these things may happen they are only the birth pangs of Christ's coming again to meet us without outstretched arms somewhere, in all this turmoil, in the future. The plan is set, the outcome already determined; all that is left is for us to faithfully follow where Christ has led the way.

It goes something like this. Charlton Heston and Cecil B. DeMille were discussing the climax of the film *Ben Hur*, the great chariot race. And as they talked about the importance of the race in the film, Heston said, "You know, some look-alike double stuntman can't really do this and make it a convincing scene. The only way I can see it, is that I have to drive the chariot myself." DeMille thought, and said, "Okay. Go take chariot lessons." (I'm not sure where one goes for chariot lessons, but Charlton Heston found a place that taught him how to drive four horses abreast pulling one of those little two-wheeled chariots.) Heston worked at it and worked at it, until one day he came to DeMille and said, "I've learned how to drive a chariot!" DeMille was really happy. "But", said Charlton Heston, "there's a problem." "And what's the problem?" asked Cecil B. DeMille. "The problem," said Charlton Heston, "is that I can drive the chariot okay, but I don't think I can win the race." Cecil B. DeMille smiled and said, "Charlton, you just stay in the race. I'll make damned sure you win!"

Amen.