

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 33 8:15/11:00 AM Sunday, November 14, 2010
Vicar William E. Chamberlin Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Malachi 4:1–2a; Psalm 98
2 Thessalonians 3:6–13; Luke 21:5–19

Maybe you recall a television commercial from the late 1970's for Paul Masson Winery, featuring Orson Welles that had the tag line, "We shall sell no wine before its time." From what I gather, wine is typically sold in the bottle at an immature stage, to be aged by the consumer and opened only when it reached its peak. Now, the problem as you might guess, is, "When will the wine be at its peak?" While persons more knowledgeable in wine than me might be able to make a better guess, and be closer to the mark, the fact remains there is no sure fire way to know "When." You may find that the vintage bottle that you've held onto for a special occasion has turned into something a bit less impressive. So, while it may be a delight and a particular point of pride to show off what's in your cellar, rest assured it will eventually drift into oblivion. A commentator for Wine Economist observes, "Aging wine is a kind of crap shoot. Each bottle is a mystery until opened."¹

You may be wondering what an outdated wine commercial has to do with the gospel for today, or maybe you've already made the connection. The big question that comes from the text is, "When?" "When will these things happen?" "How will we know when the time comes?"

Of course, the followers didn't come to this concern completely on their own intuition. Theirs is a response to Jesus, the killjoy. After all, there they were just wondering as they were wandering, admiring the handiwork and ostentation of the temple that served as the center of their world, dare I say center of their universe.

Now, I have to admit, I like to play tourist, and I have a fascination with architectural details, particularly of churches. I have literally hundreds of photos stored away from trips abroad and closer to home of some of the amazing sights I have seen. From small village churches in Germany to the Baltimore Basilica and Washington National Cathedral, among others, it never fails to impress me the efforts faithful people have put into not only building but maintaining these incredible works, some for centuries. The thing that struck me, particularly the small village churches, was how these churches were the literal and figurative center of life for the townspeople who erected them. To suggest to any of them that the day would come when these beautiful, historic houses of worship would be knocked down seems unconscionable. Yet, this is what Jesus is telling his listeners. He isn't talking about the inevitable effects of time or nature on the temple, as what happened recently to the gladiator ruins in Pompeii. He is indicating that the temple, the center of the Jewish universe at the time, would be intentionally and violently broken down, demolished.

It seems natural to want to know a schedule of events. In the arena of war and government, we want to know, "When will the wars be over? When will the troops

¹ Mike Veseth, Wine Economist (online) Feb. 10, 2009

be coming home?" Members of Congress pushed for a troop withdrawal timetable. In congregations it might be in the form of "When will the money run out and we have to shut the doors for good?" In more individual and personal cases, we want to know "How long do I have/When will I die?" when confronted with terminal illness. The question of 'when' is pervasive. By having a due date or a deadline we can plan an organized process or strategy, and prepare for what we know will be inevitable. Unfortunately, like wines, it's a kind of crap shoot. Sure we can be close and reasonably certain, but there's always a chance that our best guesses are still going to be wrong. For those who were following Jesus it seems they had determined that destruction of the Temple meant the literal end of the world, the day of the Lord. They are only concerned with the question of "When?" and "How will we know?"

Again not known for simple or straight answers, Jesus lays out an apocalyptic prophecy. He begins with a warning to not follow those who would claim the end is near. We'd never do that, right? We wouldn't give any credence to Nostradamus, Hal Lindsey, Jack van Impe or the Mayan calendar, would we? There are certainly many points of view to be found regarding the end times. While many have predicted, and even worked to scripturally support their predictions, clearly the end has not come upon us. So should we just dismiss such talk? Yes...well, maybe. If it drives us to study Scripture further, then, no. If it just gets us wrapped up in fatalism and thinking we just need to sit back and wait for the blessed end to come, then yes, we should dismiss such notions. Although Jesus doesn't give a calendar date there is a lot he DOES tell the followers and us.

After warning against not being distracted by false claims, he suggests that the followers will hear of war and insurrections. That's NOT an iffy kind of statement. The followers would hear of and experience wars and insurrections. Despite the horrific nature of war, Jesus tells them not to be terrified. Not to say that war in and of itself isn't terrifying in any sense, but Jesus is trying to clue them in that these wars are not the end. To make completely certain, he even says, "the end will not follow immediately." Jesus continues by describing revolts, natural disasters, plagues and signs and sights from heaven. These things weren't new experiences then, and they certainly aren't new in our modern day. War is obviously an ongoing issue at a variety of levels. In the past 12 months there have been major earthquakes in Haiti and Chile, a volcano and tsunami in Indonesia, a hurricane and cholera outbreak in Haiti...and those are only the ones we've heard something about in the news.

To further confuse the answer to when, Jesus leapfrogs backward to say, "Oh yeah, even BEFORE all of that stuff, all this other stuff, being seized, persecuted, put on trial before the authorities is going to happen." This is where it gets a little dangerous and concerning though. All around the globe, people are imprisoned, tortured and killed for their belief and confession of Jesus the Christ. One website estimate is 200 million people, worldwide.²

² <http://www.persecution.org> (See also <http://www.persecution.com>)

Maybe you're thinking, at this point, "When?! When is he going to end this sermon? How will we know?!" Even more so, you might be wondering what all this has to do with Trinity Lutheran Church in Camp Hill.

When was the last time you were persecuted for being a Christian? Have you been dragged before judges, magistrates or even leaders of other churches or denominations because of your association with Jesus and his message? It seems the quick and easy majority answer would be, "No," but consider for a moment the current state of our church. The Lutheran magazine's November issue cites 154 congregations have already withdrawn from the ELCA, and that overall, 544 congregations have taken first votes to leave the denomination. Members are fighting members. Families are fighting families. Some of your friends are leaving congregations, and congregations are leaving the larger church.³ Our beautiful stones and offerings, our people and congregations, the very living stones that were built up as a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood⁴ are being intentionally thrown down. Commentators and spectators alike are pondering and suggesting this is the end for the church as we know it. We will wonder if all the turmoil will destroy this church as earthquakes destroy buildings. And still, Jesus expects us to work. Author David Tiede observes, "For the faithful, even their persecution proves to be a divine vocation."⁵

"This will give you an opportunity to testify." These opportunities are not solely the arena of pastors and church leaders, but for all whom Christ has claimed since baptism. No one is off the hook. Jesus is clear, too, that he doesn't want us delivering glib, well-rehearsed oratory gems that are just so much hot air. No, our words need to be authentic, genuine, Christ-centered and Christ-grounded. Our testimony must be as natural and automatic of a response as breathing or blinking. The problem with not knowing the "when" means our well-rehearsed presentations may be outdated and irrelevant at the time we need them most, and may not speak to the context of time and place. Jesus promises to give us the words and wisdom that are irrefutable and irresistible. Our job is to stay connected with Jesus, and not think that we know better. If that wasn't already bad enough, Jesus turns up the heat just a little bit more, indicating that alignment with Christ will destroy families. Parents, siblings, relatives and beloved friends will be haters and betrayers. If our testimonies were only before public officials and rulers, it would certainly still be difficult, BUT it would hardly have the emotional weight and gravity of testifying before family and friends, at the risk of damaging or completely severing those relationships.⁶

And STILL the end has not come! WHEN?! How will we know?!

Amid all this dire news, though, Jesus still gives a word of hope and promise. Despite the hatred and the persecution, wars and earthquakes, none of which

³ Adapted from "Exegetical Notes by Pr. Brian Stoffregen" <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian>

⁴ 1 Peter 2:5

⁵ David Tiede, *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament: Luke*, 361

⁶ David Tiede, *Luke*, 362.

signal that the kingdom of God is at hand, he assures that not a hair of our heads will perish. While there are a few of us here that might take issue with that particular verse, even for a cheap laugh, it's followed by another promise: that we will gain our lives. We ARE living in the end times; we are clearly experiencing the state of the world, even if it all doesn't happen right in our own back yards. We cling to these promises because they represent God's enduring power and plan for us. Our steady, consistent and PERSISTENT sharing of the gospel nets the promise of eternal life because of God's faithfulness. "If we continue on the mission path, unafraid of the conflicts, and hold on to our conviction to share Jesus' story with the world, we will gain new life -- both for the congregation, and for the people who come to believe the gospel we have shared with them."

So, like a fine wine, the final end will not be served before its time, and only God knows that time. Until then, we are in the mean time, somewhere between the beginning of the end (the cross) and the end of the end (the return of Christ). Although troubling and tragic, we dare not sit and wait until we are certain the real end is upon us, because then it will already be too late. What Jesus offers may seem a bit confusing. First he indicates that some, not all, will be put to death, then follows with the promise that not a hair on your head shall perish. Jesus can only promise this if this world is not the end of things.⁷ It takes an enduring trust in the grace inherent in the promise of the resurrection to overcome the worries, fears and terrors of this world, because they will surely fall away.

The End is here, of the sermon, at least. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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⁷ Sundays and Seasons, Year C, 2010 (online)