

Pentecost 25, 11.14.2021

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Daniel 12:1-3; Psalm 16; Hebrews 10:11-14; 19-25; Mark 13:1-8

“Encourage One Another”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Perhaps you thought about it as you heard the gospel today: “Gosh, I wonder what the annual budget of the temple in Jerusalem was?” The temple in Jerusalem was a tremendously large structure; imagine the upkeep costs involved. It is no wonder one of the disciples said to Jesus, “*Look, Teacher, what large stones, and what large buildings!*”

Today, only the foundations of the Roman-era city and temple exist, with the smallest stones weighing about two to five tons apiece. The largest stone, the so-called “Western Stone,” weighs an estimated 250-300 tons and measures an enormous 44½ feet long by 11 feet tall. The width remains unknown. By any measure, the Second Temple in Jerusalem was a truly massive architectural achievement. The capitals of the columns on the front of the temple were covered in gold, and the roof outlined in gold. When the sun hit the temple in Jerusalem it would have shimmered with light.

The temple in Jerusalem, though massive and beautiful, was destroyed by the Roman army in the year 70 CE. The *Arch of Titus* in Rome, built a decade later, attests to the destruction of the temple. Dedicated in 81 CE to emperor Titus by his brother emperor Domitian, the *Arch of Titus* shows Roman forces carrying a large menorah and other sacred objects that had been looted from the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus’ words about the temple’s destruction were prophetic.

The words of the disciple about the temple, remind me of St. Mark’s. Since we have been worshipping again in-person, many people have shared with me how encouraging the online service has been, but that it doesn’t compare to gathering together in this beautiful sacred space, surrounded by stained glass and the glorious sounds of the pipe organ and St. Mark’s choir. I am grateful that we are able to gather together around God’s word and sacrament, offering prayer and praise to God.

By any standard, St. Mark’s building, inside and out, is a splendorous place. The *Christus Rex* marble relief on the front of the church and the stunning colors of the stained glass throughout the church allow us to glimpse the divine, drawing our thoughts upward and inspiring us to lead lives of discipleship to Jesus. Yet this bricks and mortar church and its ministries requires a budget, and as we heard a moment ago from the Finance Committee, ending the year financially strong is critical for the growth of our mission in Charlotte and beyond.

We are poised to grow in new ways. Our music ministry is expanding through a new program

titled “*Vespers at St. Mark’s*” through which we hope to encourage a wider community of musical friendship around St. Mark’s. The first concert will be held on December 5th. Mark your calendar. We are also involved in a search for a new Director of Family Ministry to help build our expanding Family Ministry for children, youth and people of all ages – the family of God at St. Mark’s. However, our 61 year-old building also requires ongoing maintenance and repairs. Like Jesus’ disciple we too are inspired by this church. Please help us in our mission to inspire others.

St. Mark’s, however, doesn’t exist in a spiritual vacuum; there is no St. Mark’s apart from us. We are the church. We are St. Mark’s and our building is the “mission center” of our worship life and many ministries. We are in our 162nd year of mission because generations of saints before us ran the race of faith, handing the baton on to us to carry during our own race of faith. Meeting our projected budgets for this year *and next* are crucial for us to continue in ministry to our community.

Seeing the temple in Jerusalem, it is not surprising that Jesus’ disciple said, “*Look, Teacher, what large stones, and what large buildings!*” And yet Jesus replied, “*Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.*” The disciples naturally wondered what Jesus meant. They later asked him, “*Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?*” Jesus began by saying, “*Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray.*”

These are also words for us. In the history of the church, there have been many who have sought to shape the Christian message to fit their own desires. As Jesus suggests, we run into danger when we desire humanly created and humanly centered teaching. As modern people we want a reasonable and rational Christianity, as if God and grace were a mathematical formula. We want a soaring spiritual experience, without daily discipleship. We want an inspiring worship service often forgetting that Jesus leads us outward to serve those in need. We want forgiveness without suffering and the cross. We want salvation, but without servanthood to others.

By warning of other teachers, Jesus is really urging us to look to him alone. The Christian journey is a life of paradox and a journey of faith in Christ. We know all these things: God is love, yet God is also justice. We are free, yet God seeks to shepherd us. We are created *for both* time and eternity. In denying ourselves and following Jesus, we discover ourselves and are blessed by God.

Jesus is warning his disciples that no one may take his place. A preacher can point to Jesus, but cannot take the place of Jesus. Worship calls us into God’s presence, but we must open our hearts to receive him. Only in denying ourselves and following Jesus will we discover the grace and strength

that comes from serving alongside Jesus. We cannot know Jesus and his benefits apart from service with him. God's grace and forgiveness always lead outward to love.

Jesus went on to tell his disciples, *"When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed... nation will rise against nation...there will be earthquakes...there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs."* Jesus is describing the Day of the Lord, that fearful day when Christ will come again to judge the nations. Matthew, chapter 25, also speaks of this day when Christ will separate the goats from the sheep. Only those who served the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick and imprisoned will be welcomed into the kingdom. As Christians we live within the paradox of faith and service to others, and this is what we are about as St. Mark's in mission.

Jesus told his disciples very plainly that there would always be wars and rumors of war, earthquakes and famines. In other words, Jesus was being very realistic about the human condition and human sinfulness. The brokenness of the world will always need a loving response from God's people. Walking in discipleship to Jesus means walking in the same direction as Jesus. It means that St. Mark's will always be found serving alongside Jesus, responding to human need in times of war and in times of disaster and suffering.

Yet if Jesus' message seems bleak, we need to remind ourselves that Jesus came to point us toward the kingdom, reminding us that God is both a God of love and a God of justice. We cannot have the God of love without serving alongside the God of justice. We cannot have the stained glass without filling a glass for those who thirst. We cannot receive grace from the Lord's table without setting a table for "the least of these," our neighbors in this world.

When Jesus speaks of wars and rumors of wars, he is reminding us that human beings, not God, start wars and conflicts. Daily we hear the rumors and reports of human conflict. We don't need bombs to be at war, because we are always at war with one another. Hatred, discrimination, racism, oppression, neglect - all place us at enmity and open conflict with one another and with God.

When Jesus speaks of earthquakes and famines, he is reminding us that life's challenges and hardships require a compassionate response from God's people. Jesus comes with good news not bleak news, encouraging us to walk with him by encouraging others with love and compassion.

Today's reading from Hebrews speaks of the faith we confess. Christ's sacrifice on the cross took away the sins of the world, and Christ risen is seated at the right hand of God. However, Christ calls upon his body in this world, the church, to fight the good fight against evil. We are the hands and voices of Christ in the world, serving others amidst rumors of war and the earthquakes of life.

The reading from Hebrews asks us *“to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.”* Even in the early church some people neglected worship. In our own day, we have turned church into a consumer item. We want it “our way” with a style of worship that suits “our needs.” We want a time that suits us, a message that suits us – not too simple but not too challenging. Hebrews reminds us that worship is to encourage, heal and forgive us, so that we might serve our neighbor in need.

St. Mark’s is a loving and generous church. We feed the hungry and homeless; we help local food needs through agencies like Loaves & Fishes, Roof Above, and Running Works. We seek to care for others through Habitat for Humanity, Room in the Inn, and Kairos prison ministry. These are good deeds we provoke and encourage one another to do for the needs of others.

As we heard earlier, our church’s ministries require financial commitment. In addition to Sunday worship and music, our ministries of compassion, Christian education, youth and family all need your support. Our sanctuary and building while not the size of the temple in Jerusalem, are certainly substantial and in constant need of upkeep and repair. We may not be facing a Roman army, but we are facing the march of time and its ongoing wear and tear on a 61 year-old building.

I encourage you to keep the “big picture” of God’s mission before you as we end the church year – and the budgetary year. I encourage you to prayerfully continue to financially support St. Mark’s commitment to God’s mission in the world.

The message of the gospel is never bleak; it is good news in a bleak world. Jesus always comes bearing good news. There will always be war and conflict, human suffering and need. Christ calls us to be his body, the church, in this world. We are his hands and voices in the struggle against human sinfulness and evil, seeking to transform the world with God’s love and justice.

The economic forecast is less than encouraging, but I encourage you to set your hopes upon Christ and his mission. When there seems to be no human way forward, Christ always makes a way forward. When we seem defeated by conflict and death, Christ comes with reconciliation and resurrection. Christ always encourages us so that we might provoke and encourage one another to serve those in need.

With Christ the news is always good. As Christ has encouraged and forgiven you, so encourage one another to act with love and good deeds. Christ is with us and will lead us into our 163rd year of mission. With Christ, no one will lead us astray. Let us trust, follow and serve him. Amen.