

St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Charlotte NC

17 November 2024

Pentecost 26

Mark 13:1-6

Fear and Assurance

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and Redeemer.

The Scripture readings for this Sunday of the church's year invite us to think about endings in our lives. Whether it is welcome like the end of a severe storm with strong winds and we can see that no trees had come down in our yard; or it may be a time for sadness or grief or even fear, like

- The ending of the life of a dear one when we come to realize that in this liminal space we are going to have to adjust to a new reality; or
- Something not nearly so consequential like the ending of the baseball season for our favorite team – I am a Detroit Tigers fan, they made the playoffs and I was engaged and then it all ended with a loss to the Cleveland baseball team. What was I going to watch now that their season had ended? Or
- The ending of the life of a congregation of faithful people of God. The parish where I was pastor for many years closed recently after a few years of struggle to keep things going. I still cannot believe that when I think about it. I can still see the smiles, feel the tears, smell the beeswax candles (we resisted getting oil candles for the longest time), the smell of potluck dinners and soup suppers and all of the joys and challenges of parish life. How did that happen – where are the people?
- You may remember when you decided to retire from your work and then even after all those plans and dreams you woke up on that first morning without an alarm and asked yourself, “now what?”

It is not a particularly easy subject to preach about since our experiences with endings is so varied and our response so confusing and unpredictable at times. But as followers of Jesus and listeners to his words and his teachings we must consider

endings and, more importantly, the ending that he speaks about in the Gospel reading for today.

Like us, these disciples he had gathered knew about endings and, as you have heard in the Gospel readings for the past few weeks, he journeyed to Jerusalem with them and along the way told them of the impending end of his life and how this would occur. So they were ready to think about endings and what this would mean for them and, I suspect, some of them were wondering how they might manage these endings. And then here in Mark 13 Jesus ups the ante a good deal by speaking not only about the end of his on earth but of the great end of the things when God will gather all things into God.

First, he points to the building that they can see. It was the center of their faith. Jesus' people made pilgrimages to this very spot where God dwelt – in that temple. You remember the story of Jesus' family making their way to Jerusalem when he was only 12 years old. People offered sacrifices there to atone for sins and as their way of giving thanks for God's goodness to them. And now Jesus is taking his disciples to this same city where he would make the once for all sacrifice for the entire human family. "Look at that beautiful place – it won't be there for long." "Not one stone will be on top of another," Jesus tells them. What a shock that must have been for them. How would their faith be expressed, where would they go, how could they adjust, what might God have in mind for them and for those who would come after them???

And then the executive committee of the disciples (Peter, James, John and Andrew) took Jesus aside for clarification. There had to be a buzz among the disciples wondering what exactly their Lord meant by this assertion. Maybe they were hoping he would say that once this temple was gone everything would be gathered into God for eternity – but no such luck. That temple being gone is just the beginning. There will be wars, rumors of war, nations will rise against nations, earthquakes and much more that bring ends to precious memories or structures about which we care deeply. That was their future.

I sometime wonder if they thought about going home and starting over in trying to find the Messiah when they heard these words. Not easy words to hear

and perhaps feeling that they had made a mistake, had been misled, had counted on this carpenter from Nazareth for more than he could ever deliver. But they did not because they had been with him long enough to know that even when there are endings and pain and confusion, our present and our future are in the hands of a loving and caring God. The chapter continues with more than we read today but even still they stayed with him because they had seen in this man from Nazareth the love of God and the assurance that God is with them.

They got it – although they did all scatter when he was on that cross, perhaps far more than they had expected. But they came back, saw the risen Christ and changed the world, in the midst of wars and persecutions, endings and trouble, earthquakes and disregard, announcing the love of God to people wherever they were able to go in the then known world.

It is so easy and self-centered to mislead and mis-interpret these words of our Lord. Perhaps you know about the Great Disappointment. If you haven't, google it when you get back on your computer. October 22, 1884. Religious fervor and expectancy had risen to a fever pitch in these United States. Department stores sold out of their white robes. Land prices plummeted in some locations as "For Sale" signs dotted the landscape.

You see it was sure and certain date for the returns of Christ as revealed in the Holy Bible, King James version, and meticulously calculated by a Vermont farmer William Miller (no relation as far as I know) and his followers. Thousands of Americans donned white robes, scaled rooftops, stretched out their arms, and waited piously for the Rapture, the Second Coming of Christ.

This made headlines and people looked like fools for having trusted this, no doubt, sincere and pious, yet misled, man. The moral of the story? If someone uses the Bible to calculate the end of time and is certain when it will be and offers you a home on the lake for \$5,000 to be freed of the burden of owning property, take it.

Today we are offered again by the lectionary to understand how we Lutherans interpret the Bible. We do it together, we do it with study, we do it by listening to one another and most importantly we let the Scripture interpret

Scripture. Simply put, when we run across a passage that puzzles us or that we don't fully understand, we look for other places in the Bible that will help us better understand what is being revealed here. And today, we have this precious passage in the second lesson for Hebrews that helps us. This first century pastor, inspired by the Spirit and showing the love the Christ, enjoins the people to whom this is written: "we have confidence that this sacrifice of Jesus," "we have the full assurance of faith," "we have been washed with pure water" and "we hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering."

We know there will be an ending, we know that God is drawing all of creation to himself, we see God at work in the world. We'd all like to be able to see the future and know when this will be, what it will be like but it exceeds our imaginations. What we do know is in the meantime, we gather together to hear the promises, we receive Christ who comes to us in word and sacrament, we encourage one another, and we love one another and all of God's creation because in God's mercy, God has loved us in the person of Jesus Christ our Lord.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.