

November 13, 2016
Luke 21:5-19

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and from Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

- You will be arrested and persecuted
- You will be handed over to religious and secular authorities
- You will be betrayed by your own family
- Some of you may be put to death
- You will be hated because of me

All this just doesn't sound so appealing does it? Why can't following Jesus be easier? Why can't life as a Christian be simple, easy, carefree, and peaceful all the time? We long for that day when Christ returns to fully usher in God's kingdom and the promise there will no longer be weeping, pain, hunger, division, strife, or conflict; but, Jesus makes it known in our gospel passage that life in the present world will be one where all these things are unavoidable. Jesus' followers will encounter violence, the turbulent wind and waters of floods, hurricanes, and tornadoes, wars, and evil around us but through it all we hear Jesus speak, "Do not be terrified!"

Yet, I can only fathom the young church was terrified when Luke wrote this gospel some 50 years or so after Jesus' death and resurrection. They were living in the midst of a very chaotic and frightening world. The walls literally came crashing down upon them as Roman authorities in 70 C.E destroyed the Temple. Luke continues in the book of Acts to describe the suffering, persecution and martyrdom many will suffer. I imagine they were left questioning, "Now what?" "Where do we go?"

I know I have asked that question many times as your pastor and I imagine over the many years God called Bethany Lutheran Church into existence this question has been

posed numerous times by the faithful. It's a question facing many a congregation in North America today as the numbers continue to dwindle on Sunday morning. Increased costs in nearly every sector of the marketplace have forced people's budgets to the maximum often leading to people working multiple jobs. Many are faced with difficult decisions on how and where to steward the money they have been entrusted with. Congregations likewise are having to make difficult decisions as health insurance premiums have escalated leaving many in a quandary of whether they can afford a full-time pastor or have to trim the budget somewhere and in most cases that may be benevolence giving to the wider church and the many important ministry and mission projects we share together. What is the answer? Is God really present and active within the church and the world? We ask the question and like is customary in our society we look for the easy answer – the simple solution. We look toward new programs and gadgets. We look to new leadership who will solve all the problems. We try to emulate the fast growing mega churches. We may even withdraw completely as that is the easiest thing to do. We may be led astray and chase after something else that seems to offer us temporary satisfaction, the promise of an easier life, and the hope of a better tomorrow. We may seek life in something that fails to bring it.

Like so much apocalyptic scripture our text today reveals the stark reality that God continues to be engaged in a battle with the evil forces of the world. As God's called and faithful people we too enter into the groaning of creation as we await the day Jesus comes again. But while we wait what do we do? While we struggle and at times suffer what do we do? While we even ponder at times if the world is coming to an end, what do we do?

Do we sit and sulk or do we join with the saints of all generations in giving praise to God? Of staying the course and following the “game plan” Jesus followed. Of setting our sight always on the One who is Sovereign, who gives life, who conquers death, who strives for justice, who seeks out the lost and lonely, who comforts the poor, feeds the hungry, frees the oppressed, and heals the sick. Conflict is going to come. Trials and tribulations are certain. Pain and sickness are unavoidable. But God continues to call us and lead us into the midst of a broken world because God is in the midst of a broken world as Jesus continues to go ahead of us to encounter the sickness, the stranger, the anguish, the turmoil, the persecution, the hatred, and he himself meets us there.

God's will seeks justice, peace, and love for thy neighbor yet God knows around every turn sin is rearing its ugly head attempting to thwart this will. But, let us cling to this fact! Let us proclaim this good news! God has not stopped fighting the evil forces of the world and God has shown that God brings hope and new life out of situations that seemed hopeless. God brought life out of death on the cross. God's Spirit spoke through the prophets of old and certainly gave words of wisdom to the early Christian church to testify to the good news of Jesus Christ even as fires burned and wars raged around them. The church will encounter conflict but the good news is that God has the ability to turn conflict into fruit for the kingdom. As ELCA Pastor Brian Stoffrehagen writes, “The Christian faith does not remove us from conflict, but, we might say, it gives us a purpose and a use for the conflict -- times and places and opportunities to witness to the grace of God revealed in Jesus.”

In times of conflict, turmoil, stress, fear, pain, grief, and struggle the faithful followers of Jesus Christ must not “be led astray” from the mission set before it. We must not “be led astray” into hopelessness and complacency for these are the devil’s breeding ground. We must always cling to hope. Hope in the God who takes death and creates life. Hope in Jesus Christ who promises to never leave our side. Hope in the Holy Spirit who will give us “words and wisdom” to testify. We must not “be led astray” from that which Jesus called his disciples to, that which he calls his church to, that which he calls us to. In a nutshell he summed it up when he said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:36-39) In the midst of everything which might be going on in our world, in our congregation, in our nation, and in our communities there remains some constants that ground us, root us, and guide our response. God is Sovereign of all. Christ is King and Lord of all. He is our Savior. We are called to “love God” and “love neighbor.” No matter where we sit today, what emotions we are experiencing, which side we are on our response, our mission, our witness remains the same: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” These are our neighbors. The ones who are celebrating. The ones who are aching. The ones who are longing. The ones who are dejected. The ones who hope for change. The ones who fear their voices won't be heard. The ones who wonder what next? These are our neighbors and we are called to love one another. Yes, that's hard. Jesus never said it would be easy. But that is what we are called to do. Love one another. Just as He has loved us first.