

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 13 November 2022
Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost - Year C - Lectionary 33

1st Reading: *Malachi 4:1-2a*

Psalm: 98

2nd Reading: *II Thessalonians 3:6-13*

Gospel: *Luke 21:5-19*

Sermon - Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø

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

About a year and a half ago, we were at our daughter Arwen's house, and Coral had gone out with her and some of the grandchildren to run some errands. They needed to get some supplies at the pet store, and there in the store was a whole array of puppies. One particular puppy, when it saw Coral, started jumping frantically in its cage, while all the rest seemed to just ignore everyone. Coral went off to look for the supplies while the grandchildren continued to watch the puppies, and when she went away, the one that had been jumping up and down calmed down like all the rest. Then Coral came back, and again the puppy began leaping in the air excitedly, as if trying to get her attention.

And at this point, our granddaughter Caitlin, who was 11 years old at the time, seemed to realise what was going on. She turned to Coral and said, "Grammie, God is giving you this dog!" Well, what did this mean? Was this indeed a sign from God - a puppy that seemed to recognise something in Coral, and a sweet girl who was interpreting the situation?

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus' disciples ask Jesus about signs from God. They had just come from the temple. Remember last week when we were talking about what makes a place holy? It is that it has been set apart from other places and dedicated for God's use. Now, the temple in Jerusalem was not just *A* holy place, it was *THE* holy place, the Holy of Holies, the one place on earth where God had promised to dwell among us. And not only that, it was a beautiful, magnificent building. The disciples were impressed. Wow! What a place to see, and what a place to be.

And then Jesus once again says something shocking: "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

To the disciples, who knew that God had promised to dwell in the temple, this was not just a prediction that the city of Jerusalem would one day be destroyed, it also meant that God would be abandoning his people, or that his people would be abandoning God. This had, after all, happened once before, when Solomon's temple was destroyed by the Babylonians hundreds of years ago. And now it had been rebuilt

It is no wonder that the disciples would be troubled by this, and ask Jesus when this would happen, and what would be the sign from God that this was to happen. The first time around, God had sent many prophets to warn the people, especially Jeremiah, so what was this all about? What warnings would Jesus give them now?

Well, this passage, as well as others in the New Testament, including Paul's letters to the Thessalonians and the Revelation to John, have been used by people for 2,000 years now to try to predict the end not only of the temple, but of the world. In every generation there have been those who have predicted that the signs are now right and the end of the world is coming.

Even some of the people in Thessalonika, as we read this morning, were so convinced that Jesus was about to return that they had stopped working and were just sitting around, looking into the sky, waiting for Jesus.

In our generation, a whole industry of books and films has arisen, written by those who interpret these passages in a certain way - there will be certain wars and famines, and then there will be the "rapture" when all the Christians disappear, and then there will be a seven-year period they call the "Tribulation". But are they interpreting the signs correctly?

So far such people have all been wrong. There were plenty of them in Martin Luther's day as well. Of course, one of these days someone may get it right, because the final day will come along some time, but let's look carefully at how Jesus himself answers the disciples about such signs.

His first response is to warn the disciples: "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them". In other words, don't pay attention to those who try to predict when Jesus would return. And then what does he say? "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven." And it is these statements that many of the predictors catch hold of, and try to match certain wars, earthquakes or plagues with what they think Jesus must be referring to.

But what is Jesus really saying about these wars and famines? In Mark's Gospel he says, "Don't be alarmed. These are like false labor pains." In other words, these are like Braxton-Hicks contractions. When Coral was nine-months pregnant with our daughter Arwen, she started having contractions one day, so we rushed to the hospital. But the contractions ended, and we went back home. And she wasn't born for another week. Coral had been having false labor pains, that *weren't* signs that the baby was coming yet.

So this is what Jesus is saying here. Wars, earthquakes, famines are not signs. They are distressing, and so you may think that they are signs, but don't be alarmed. Don't be fooled. Wars and earthquakes will continue to happen. They are simply to be expected. Don't stop living out your Christian life. Don't stop what you are doing and just sit and wait like those people in Thessalonika were doing. Paul wrote this second letter to them specifically to say that this was the wrong approach. If they thought that the time was short, they should do all the more good that they could. Pray constantly, act in love, do good for others.

There is a story that Martin Luther was asked what he would do if he knew the world would end tomorrow, and he answered, "I would plant a tree." So let's not worry about the end of the world, let us serve God in the best ways that we can - doing good for one another, taking care of our families and those who can't care for themselves, making quilts or prayer shawls. There's no end to the good we can do.

But... does all this mean that God *never* gives us signs about what we should do? Does God ever try to tell us to work in certain directions? Yes, I think he does, and there are many cases in the Bible of God doing just that. So how do we recognise such signs? They may be subtle taps on our shoulder. They may be words from others, encouraging us to do something that maybe we were considering but weren't sure about. Maybe they are a puppy that seemed to recognise its new owner, and a sweet girl who understood that sign.

Yes, we did get that puppy, a black cockapoo that we've named Willoughby. He does take work, and I'm not at all sure that our cats interpret him as a gift from God, at least two of our cats certainly don't think so. But he is a living creature that we can love and who loves us, and he's helping us to get in brisk morning walks, good for all of us.

And perhaps some signs from God don't always mean that we must make one particular choice or another, perhaps they can be opportunities for us to do something good if we are willing. So I do recommend that we pay attention to subtle taps on our shoulders, and then listen to hear if they may indeed be from God.

Amen!

