

“These Things Must Take Place First”

Malachi 4:1-2a; Psalm 98; Luke 21:5-19

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We have arrived at that time of the year when many of the scripture readings start to look forward to the future. Advent is coming in just a couple weeks, when the theme of eager anticipation to the promised coming of God will be in full view, but we begin to get a taste of it now, as we hear the words that Jesus spoke to his disciples concerning things that were to come. This passage, and others like it, fill preachers like me with some degree of anxiety, because there is quite a bit that requires some interpretation. When we start talking about the future – well, proceed with caution!

Let's step into this gently. Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem. We are in the 21st chapter of Luke's gospel, which has only 24 chapters. The last three of those chapters focus on the final two days of Christ's earthly life, and his resurrection two days later. So today's passage is one of the very last stories from the ministry of Jesus. They are in Jerusalem, near the temple. Now it is important to understand that the Jews only had *one* temple. There were synagogues in many cities, towns, and villages, but only one temple. Synagogues were places where faithful Jews would go each Sabbath to worship God: to pray, to sing, to hear scripture, and to listen to a rabbi talk about the scripture. Jewish synagogues were – and remain to this day – remarkably like Christian churches. There is much that we do that is very, very similar. But the temple in Jerusalem – that was something entirely different. We have no analogue for it in Christianity. It was a grand edifice – the most significant landmark in the city of Jerusalem. The mount upon which the temple stood occupied a significant portion of the footprint of the city. It is roughly rectangular in shape, more than 1500 feet wide and about a thousand feet long. Its total area is about 37 acres. That's about the size of 28 football fields. This was a *massive* religious center. It also had *massive* importance to the Jewish people. It had originally been built *ten centuries* before Jesus, out of freshly cut cedar wood overlaid with gold. It was the place that held Israel's most sacred objects; for the first several hundred years it contained the Ark of the Covenant, in which was kept the two tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments that God had given to Moses. In front of the temple was an enormous altar, upon which priests carried out a variety of animal sacrifices, including a prescribed daily sacrifice and other animal and grain offerings that were prescribed in the Torah. There was a constant smell of cooked animal meat, along with fragrant incense, and a constant stream of smoke rising up to the heavens. These sacrifices, so the faithful Jews believed, were what helped Israel maintain a right relationship with God. In the innermost part of the temple was a chamber called the Holy of Holies, which no one could ever enter, except the High Priest, and him only once a year, on the Day of Atonement. Many Jews believed that the very presence of God resided in the Holy of Holies. This building was of *enormous* importance to the Jewish people.

So you can imagine how thunderstruck Jesus's disciples were, as they marveled at the beautiful temple stonework, when Jesus said, “the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” This massive edifice, this grand sanctuary, this religious center of the Jewish

faith, this cultural center of the Jewish people, this twelve-hundred-year-old sacrificial system that was at the core of Israel's relationship with God – Jesus was saying it was *all* going to be thrown down. It had happened once before, six hundred years earlier, when the invading Babylonian army had utterly destroyed it and looted its treasures. Jesus was saying that was going to happen again.

He was right. In the year AD 70, forty years after Christ's death and resurrection, Roman legions besieged and captured the city of Jerusalem, in retaliation for a Jewish revolt against Roman rule. The Roman General Titus, who later became Emperor, ordered that the entire city be burned. The temple went down in flames. Nineteen and a half centuries later, it has *never* been rebuilt.

That's the first part of what Jesus had to say about the devastation that was to come. It had *specifically* to do with the temple in Jerusalem. It's actually quite clear, and it points to a very specific event that forever changed the destiny of the Jewish people. But then Jesus moves on, to talk in more general terms about a broad array of things that will occur before the end of all things. He does this because his disciples want to know “when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place.” In Matthew's version of this same story, the question they ask is a bit more specific: “when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” The disciples want to know how to tell when *Jesus* will be coming back. They want to know about the signs that will herald the *end of the age*. So Jesus says: “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.” There is quite a lot that has to happen before Jesus will come back, and before the world will end. Make a list: wars, insurrections, nation rising against nation, kingdom against kingdom, earthquakes, famines, plagues, “dreadful portents” and “great signs from heaven.” That list could be expanded greatly, if we were to look at passages from the last six chapters in the book of Daniel, the parallel versions of this story in Mark 13 and Matthew 24, the rest of this chapter in Luke, certain passages from Paul's letters, like in 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4 and 2 Thessalonians 2, and apocalyptic passages in the book of Revelation. If you want to know all the things that have to happen before the “end times,” well, there's quite a lot the New Testament has to say about all that, and there are plenty of Christians over the years who have tried to take all those passages and compile them into one coherent timeline.

But there are certain problems with that approach. First, there has been some strong disagreement among different Christians about the specific order of certain events. In a few cases those disagreements have been so sharp that denominations have splintered and new denominations have been born. There is not one universally agreed-upon timeline among Christians who have studied those matters closely. Second, all of the events that Jesus mentions here are events that have happened time and again throughout the last two thousand years, and are probably going to keep happening for who knows how many years or centuries or millennia to come. Wars, famines, earthquakes – things like these just keep happening. And as for “dreadful portents” and “great signs from heaven” – well, Jesus might simply be referring to things like eclipses and comets and meteor showers, which of course keep happening as well, and nowadays astronomers can give us a heads-up whenever something significant is about to happen, like that total lunar eclipse that took place last Tuesday. A good deal of what Jesus says has to happen are things that *just keep happening*. There's not much that Jesus says will happen that hasn't happened already, time and time again. Third, numerous Christians over the centuries have used scripture passages like this to calculate a specific year when the end would come. There have been *many* different predictions; one of the earliest was when made by some prominent Christians in the early church who predicted the world would end in

the year 500. Obviously, they were quite wrong! Many, *many* others since then have been wrong as well. Be wary of people who make specific predictions! Multiple passages in the New Testament stress that *no one* – not even the angels! – knows when Christ will come. Repeatedly we are told that Jesus will come “like a thief in the night” and “at an hour you do not expect.” In Acts, Jesus says: “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.” You might *want* to know when Christ will return. But you don’t *get* to know that. I would suggest that we are better off spending our time and energy *following his teachings* than trying to make predictions about things we are not meant to know. As one wise commentary puts it: “The Lord’s emphasis is on watchfulness and the practice of virtue rather than on constructing timetables of things that have not yet happened.”

I know there are some of you who think we are approaching the end times. You look around at what’s going on in our nation, or in the world; you see a lot of lawlessness and a lot of disrespect for biblical teachings; you see rising political tensions; you see natural disasters that are only getting worse as climate change continues unabated. Some branches of the Christian Church are loudly proclaiming that the end of the world is coming very soon. But not all branches of the faith see things this way; generally speaking, the Catholics, the Orthodox, and Protestant traditions with long histories like ours take a more measured approach. If you look back over the whole course of history, you see civilization after civilization rise and fall. Ancient Sumer. The Indus Valley civilization. Ancient Egypt. Early imperial China. The Mayans. The Greeks. The Roman Empire. And so on. Each of those remarkable civilizations had a rise, an extended period of great strength, and eventually a period of decline and, in some cases, collapse. There is no question that we are currently going through an extended period of great transition, and some would say we are living through the decline and fall of American civilization as we know it. But just because our civilization is changing, or maybe declining, doesn’t necessarily mean that Jesus is coming back anytime soon. He didn’t come when the Roman Empire fell. What makes us think he’s going to come *now*? I’m inclined to think that we should put our emphasis on living a faithful Christian life – just like innumerable Christians have done, in an incredibly wide range of times and places and circumstances and civilizations over two thousand years. Whether or not Jesus is coming back sooner or later shouldn’t make *any* difference in how we’re living our life. If we bind ourselves to Christ, we’ll be *just fine* if he comes soon, and we’ll also be *just fine* if he doesn’t come for a long, long time. I frankly don’t see much point in speculating or debating about whether the end times are happening *now*. Live your life. Be the kind of person Jesus wants you to be. Do the things that Jesus wants you to do. Love God. Love your neighbor. Grow. Give generously. Serve. Share the faith. And let *God* take care of the rest.

One final word. Jesus also says that there are going to be hard times for Christians. “They will arrest you and persecute you.... You will be betrayed even by parents and siblings, by relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name.” It’s not always easy being a Christian. Christians have been, at different times and in different places, feared, hated, or persecuted. In some parts of the world this happens still. Many people in our own country have little respect for our faith or for the people who practice it. Sometimes your faith can cause a strain in your relationships with friends or family members or co-workers. Jesus’ point is clear: *it’s not always easy being a Christian*. Some people are going to treat you poorly because of it. But that doesn’t mean we should pretend to be someone we’re not. At the end of the day, our relationship with *God* matters more than any human relationship. Don’t let the naysayers throw you off course. If you want to be faithful to Jesus, then *be faithful to Jesus*. Even if it hurts. Because, says Jesus, “not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.” You have *nothing* to worry about!

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