

“Not Even *One Stone*”

St. Mark 13:1-13

Trinity Lutheran - Kearney, Missouri

November 15, 2009 – 24th Sunday After Pentecost



Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Today marks that time in the Church Year when our focus begins to shift to the Second Coming of Christ – when He comes in great glory as Judge of the living and the dead. The purpose of all this is that it reminds how this world is passing away. It helps us to set aside those things we think of as being urgent, so that we might consider the urgency of the End. It reminds us that time *is* growing shorter. Salvation *is* nearer today than it has ever been. It’s time for us to wake from our spiritual slumber, to keep our vigil with sober prayer, and to worship God with due reverence and awe.

This morning’s Gospel brings us to Jerusalem, about the time of Jesus’ crucifixion. Our Lord Christ and His disciples were leaving the Temple, and as the disciples looked around they couldn’t help but marvel at the majesty there before them. The construction of the Temple had been going on for nearly fifty years – and would continue for another fourteen. The Temple grounds covered almost one sixth of the total area of Jerusalem, and some of its stones were as large as a semi tractor-trailer. The disciples of Jesus – as you might imagine – were understandably proud, and so they said: “Look Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!”

That was when Jesus began to direct their attention beyond the beauty of the buildings to the coming judgment. Because He knew the days of the Temple were numbered, He said to them: “Not one stone will be left upon another. Every one will be thrown down.” The disciples were dumbstruck, perhaps even sullen, at hearing Jesus’ words. Indeed, it appears they didn’t utter anything else until some time later when they sat down with Jesus on the Mount of Olives. Troubled, they asked Him: “Tell, us, when will these things happen? What will be the sign?”

Jesus told them that it wasn’t for them – or for us – to know such things. The End is simply a matter of trust in this One who alone is the Beginning and the End – the Alpha and Omega – the First and the Last. But Jesus also knew how difficult their waiting would be, so He said to them: “Watch out that no one deceives you, for many will come claiming to be Me.” False messiahs, preachers and teachers will be the order of the day until the End comes – and they’ll increase in number as it draws near. Just look how many there are in our own day seeking to deceive with their speculations and predictions. There are more sects of Christianity now than at any other time in the history of the world – and that number grows larger with every passing day – and all of them claim to have the

Truth. That’s why what Jesus said to His disciples so long ago also applies equally well to each of us today: “Watch out, that no one deceives you!”

There will be wars and rumors of wars as nations rise up in arms against their neighbors, and as kingdoms strike out against kingdoms. It’s all over the news wherever you look. In fact, for all the talk of peace and cooperation being bandied about, it turns out that the 20th Century was the bloodiest in human history. More people died on battlefields in the 1900’s than in all the recorded history of the world. More Christians were martyred for the faith than all who were put to death during the great persecution of the Early Church. With earthquakes and famines as far as the eye can see, can there be any question that the End is near?

And yet, as bad as it sounds, the disciples of our Lord are not to live in fear – for suffering, agony, the upheaval of wars, earthquakes and famines, *are not* a sign that God has abandoned His creation. They *aren’t* the throes of death, but rather the birth pains of the New Creation. As an expectant mother recognizes her labor will ultimately bring joy and the birth of a child, so also wars and disasters are to be seen as nothing more than the painful contractions of the New Creation about to be born. That’s how you and I are able to rejoice even in the midst of suffering. Jesus has enabled us to see beyond the pain, the killing, the earthquakes and the famines to the coming kingdom of God and its endless joy.

In the Church, Jesus says, there will be persecutions from within and without until the End. Those who follow Jesus in glory must also follow Him in rejection and suffering. They’ll be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the Synagogues – even as Jesus was handed over to be tried and crucified. Because of Him many will stand before governors and kings as witnesses – just as Jesus stood before the Council, Herod, and Pilate. Who can erase from their minds the picture of Peter and John testifying before the Sanhedrin, Stephen preaching before the council and being stoned to death, or St. Paul, testifying in chains before heads of state as a prisoner of the Gospel?

Still, Jesus has a good word for His disciples in the midst of all this: “Before the End comes,” He reminds us, “the Good News must be preached to all nations.” By means of this weak, suffering, divided Church, Christ is still able to proclaim the Good News of His reign of grace. In fact, the pressure of persecution empowers such preaching. The more the Gospel is pushed, the stronger it grows. In the Book of Acts, though great fear nearly overpowered the infant Church, our Lord still added mightily to its

numbers. Ultimately persecution drove the first Christians out into the world from the comfortable confines of Jerusalem. As Joseph Stalin would later observe: "The Church is like a nail. The harder you hit it, the deeper you drive it."

We've seen this same truth in our own day. Nowhere is the depth of devotion greater, the willingness to risk everything for the sake of Christ more profound, or the witness of the Gospel more zealous, than in those places where Christians are persecuted. Think of fellow believers who once lived under Communism in Russia and East Germany, or the Churches who still live under Communist rule in China or portions of Asia. And don't forget those Christians who're living under Islam – a religion which of late has made it more than abundantly clear that if nothing else they are devoted to the extermination of Christianity.

Jesus knew His Church would be under pressure, that's why He said to His disciples: "When you're arrested and brought to trial, don't worry about what you're going to say. Just say whatever the Spirit gives you at the moment!" That doesn't mean sermons don't have to be carefully prepared, or that you can just open your Bible and trust the Spirit to "wing it." Nor does it mean you don't have to prepare yourself daily through the study of Scripture so you'll be ready to give an account of the hope that's in you. Remember, for three years Jesus put His word into His disciples' ears, and promised that this implanted word wouldn't depart from them in their hour of need.

The Communists discovered it was virtually impossible to take God's Word away from Christian prisoners. Even though they confiscated their Bibles, Catechisms and hymnals, still the people reconstructed them by hand from memory. When they put preachers in prison, still they preached sermons in jail cells from texts they knew by heart. Simple, unsophisticated men and women have silenced kings and rulers with the raw power of their witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So, Jesus' sign of persecution is a sobering sign to consider – especially given the fact that here in our country – at least for the time being – we're able to worship in comfort and speak freely of our faith. But will you worship when it's no longer comfortable? Will you speak when you're no longer free to speak? Brother *will* betray brother, says Jesus, and a father his own children. Children will turn their parents in to have them executed. It's happened before, and it will happen again. Indeed, you can be sure it's happening even now – even as we speak – somewhere in the world.

"All men will hate you because of Me," says Jesus, so if you want the world to like you, you'd better not hang too close to Christ, for it's His disciples who'll be the ones

tested, sifted and tried by fire. Only a genuine hope – a hope focused upon Christ and nurtured by His sobering Word – will be able to remain pure and unshaken. In this world, you see, your Baptism makes you marked men and women. Marked by the Crucified One, you bear His seal upon your brow – His mark of ownership. And the more that seal shows, the more you'll be hated. Yet Jesus has given a wonderful promise to all those who come through this great tribulation called life: "He who endures to the end will be saved." Dear friends, Christianity is not a spectator sport. It requires that as a child of God you do what the Lord has given you to do – that you bear His cross as a sign of life in the midst of a dying world – that you follow Jesus through His death on the cross and into His life in heaven. St. James says, "Blessed is the man who endures trial, for when he has stood the test he'll receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love Him."

For those who believe, when the end comes, salvation will be the only possession worth having. Salvation, dear Christian, is your past, your present, and your future. It's your past, in that Jesus died on a cross two thousand years ago to save us all. It's your present, because Baptism now saves you through Jesus' death and resurrection. And it's your future, because the end has yet to come. When Temples have toppled and wars have run their course, when the earth has shaken one last time and famines have destroyed all living life, when kings and rulers have had their day, and when the whole world has turned against those who follow Jesus, our Lord will yet prevail. In that day, those who have fought the good fight of faith and suffered patiently, will receive a crown of life.

That's the hope we have in Jesus Christ – a hope that will see you through to the end. Are you going to make it? Will you be able endure and stand firm until the day of His coming? Not on your own, to be sure – not outside the Church – and not apart from Christ. But in Christ, joined to and buried with Him through Baptism, you *will* endure – because that's what He's promised. You will endure as members of His body, the Church. You will endure, as you live in His Word and draw life from His Holy Spirit. You will endure, as you anchor your life in Holy Baptism and daily drink deeply from the well of forgiveness Baptism freely offers. You will endure, as you eat and drink our Lord's body and His blood in His Supper. You will endure, because Christ endured the cross for us all. And enduring in Him you *will* be saved. You have His Word on it. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.