

McCabe United Methodist Church

December 20, 2009

Luke 21:25-36

“Signs of the Time”

Pastor Gary Walters

Our scripture lesson this morning comes from the gospel of Luke and I'll start at Chapter 21, verse 25.

“Strange things will happen to the sun, moon and the stars. The nations on earth will be afraid of the roaring seas and tides and they won't know what to do. People will be so frightened that they'll faint because of what is happening to the world. Every power in the skies will be shaken then the son of man will be seen coming in a cloud with great power and glory. When all of this starts happening, stand up straight, be brave, you will soon be set free. Then Jesus told them a story. ‘When you see a fig tree, or any other tree, putting out leaves, you know summer will soon come.’ Likewise, when you see these things happening you know that God's kingdom will soon be here. You can be sure that some of the people of this generation will still be alive when all of this takes place. The sky and the earth will not last forever, but my words will. Don't spend all of your time thinking about eating, or drinking, or worrying about life, if you do the final day will suddenly catch you like a trap. That day will surprise everyone on earth. Watch out and keep praying that you can escape all that is going to happen and that the son of God will be pleased with you.”

The word of God, for the people of God, thanks be to God.

This is a bit of a strange passage but I'm going to tell you a joke that hopefully will help shed great light on what we are dealing with this morning. Ole and Lena were sitting down to their morning cup of coffee and they had the radio on and the weather report broke in and it reported three to five inches of snow is expected today. A snow emergency has been declared, everyone has to park on the even numbered side of the street. “Uhhhh,” Ole sets down his cup of coffee and says “geez, okay” and he goes out and he moves his car. Well a few days later Ole and Lena are having their morning cup of coffee and the weather man breaks in on the radio again and he says two to four inches of snow is expected today. There has been a snow emergency declared. Everyone has to park on the odd side of the street. “Uhhhh”, Ole sets down his cup of coffee, “geez, okay,” and he gets up and he goes and he moves his car. Well a few days later, again they are having their morning cup of coffee and the weather man again breaks in on the radio and says there are six to eight inches of snow expected, there has been a snow emergency declared and right at that moment the power goes out and Ole doesn't get the rest of his message. He looks at Lena and says “What am I going to do?” Lena looks at Ole and says “Oh, Ole just leave the car in the garage.”

This passage is a little bit as if the power went out halfway through. It's full of these Old Testament images that we are unfamiliar with and a lot of imagery that is unfamiliar to our

modern ears. We read it and think hmf. And what is even stranger is that this is one of the Advent readings for this Advent season. I have to admit I don't preach on this stuff very often, with all of its end-time imagery and that message that runs through it. There is a lot of energy expended by various folks and different groups speculating what the end of this age will be like. What it will be like when Christ returns and when it is going to happen and the folks go into very detailed study of scripture in terms of this is how its going to happen and this is what it going to look like and this is what is going to take place. Lots of people have made predictions about the end of time. It's a bit confusing for us and then even more so that this reading falls in Advent.

I have studied the scripture carefully and I have an extremely profound observation, or insight, as to when the end of the world is going to take place. So, I want you to listen carefully because this will solve the issue, solve the question forever. Christ's coming is closer today than it was yesterday. I guarantee it. It's closer today than it was yesterday.

For all the mystery and the kind of strange imagery in this passage, that's Jesus' point, that's what Luke is conveying to us when he records these words of Christ, that Christ's coming is closer today than it was yesterday, saying that history is going somewhere. There is a beginning and there will be an end, you can guarantee it. That's the promise, that's the statement, that's the big idea in this passage. That contrary to a lot of Eastern religion and New Age religion, that kind of has this image of history or humanity being on this sort of eternal treadmill, that in contrast to that the Christian and Hebrew view, is that history has a beginning and an end and for Christians we know and believe that that end will come when Christ returns to consummate, or to establish his kingdom here on earth.

Now, as for all that other speculation, Christ himself said no one knows the day or the hour, not even the son, not even himself. No one knows the day or the hour, except the father in heaven. So for us to try and figure it out might be an interesting hobby, but it really is kind of a futile exercise we know that much. What Luke is really after here, and this is the other idea in this passage that we need to hear and need to understand, what Luke is really after is that we need to live prepared and ready for that day because Christ's coming is closer today than it was yesterday, you can guarantee it.

Now, for the very first people who heard these words of Christ and then for the audience that Luke wrote to, think about this, these were some of the very folks who had seen Christ ascending into heaven after his death and resurrection. They understood full and well the eminent possibility of Christ's return just like he left, coming down out of the clouds with authority and power. But, then days turned into weeks and weeks turned into months and months turned into years and it has now been a generation or more from the time that Christ left to Luke recording these words and sending them out to the church and their sense of urgency was growing cold. As a result, their devotion was not what it once was. So, Luke writes these words really as a warning, to live ready, to live in anticipation for the coming of Christ. That's

why this reading falls in Advent. We prepare in this season of Advent and often we think of it as preparing for the baby Jesus. But, we need to remember Christ came that way once. When he comes again it will not be as a baby in a manger, it will be as the Lord of creation. The imagery in scripture is with the heavens splitting open and there will be no question of who is in control. But, scripture tells us that day will come upon us like a thief in the night. Because, it's closer today than it was yesterday.

If you want to look at prophecy and all that other stuff, everything that needs to happen for Christ's return has taken place. He waits, I think, out of sheer graciousness, to give us the opportunity to respond. So, Luke impresses this message upon us, be ready, pay attention, watch and pray; that's how my NIV says it, watch out and keep praying that you can escape, is how the CEV or our bibles here in the sanctuary read that, but to pay attention.

There is this troubling passage or this troubling verse that says "this generation will certainly not pass away before these things take place." In biblical language a generation was 20 years more or less. I think we've got it down to 10 now, but 20 was the biblical standard. If a generation is 20 years and if the gospel of Luke was written between 45 and 55 AD, Jesus spoke these words probably about 32 AD, I'm pretty sure that none of that original generation is still alive--I haven't heard about it anyway. So either Luke misquotes Jesus, Jesus was wrong, or there is something that we don't quite understand in terms of how the language is being used.

I am going to venture a guess, and there are others who agree with me on this in terms of scholars and different folks, but in the gospel of Luke, generation is a word that is used often just for people in general. These people, these rebellious people, almost always used in that term of rebellious people, who are resistant to God's kingdom and his will and who refused to acknowledge and refused to see that in Christ the kingdom of God had come near. So, this generation refers more to a disposition of these people who resisted God, who resisted Christ in his ministry.

With that in mind, perhaps what Jesus was saying was that to the very end, to the last moment, there is going to be resistance to my kingdom. There will be those who refuse to see or believe that God's kingdom is at hand. But he says despite that, watch and pray, be ready, because my coming is closer today than it was yesterday.

Well, what does all of this really mean for us. How does it get practical. I think the real challenge of this passage is to ask us the question or challenge us with the question, are we living expectantly? Are we living in such a way that we are preparing ourselves for the coming of Christ and his kingdom, or is the way that we live unpreparing us, or disqualifying us to stand in his presence. It's a good question, because we do not know the hour or the day. And, if Christ tarries another couple thousand or years or whether he comes tomorrow, the message to the church is to live ready. The message to each of us is to be prepared, because his coming is closer now than when we first believed.

Consider that question, is your lifestyle, are your habits, are the things that you do day to day preparing you for the coming of Christ. Do you live with an expectation, an expectation that Christ could come at any moment, or that we may go meet him at any moment, there are no guarantees in terms of our time on either end. Whether we see Christ or whether we cease from bodily life today or tomorrow or 20 years from now, at some point we will stand before Christ and are we living ready, have we heard that full message, or did the radio get unplugged, did the power go out part way through the message? The challenge is before us, to live ready. Would you pray with me?

Lord, we thank you that you came as a baby, born in a stable, laid in a manger, but remind us, help us live with that reality, that the next time you come you will come in power and glory and that that day will come like a thief in the night. So help us to live expectantly for your return in Jesus' name. Amen.