

There are many ways to think about how we might grow in our walk with the Lord, as we did last week when we considered the Beatitudes. In the Gospel, we heard Jesus' admonition concerning the final judgment. It's pretty easy to gloss over such words as disciples of Christ, for we've already received the promise of eternal life. However, upon closer study we discover what Jesus said includes a teaching about how we might walk with him between now and eternity.

OPENING PRAYER

READ Luke 21:5-36

While some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, ⁶“As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” ⁷And they asked him, “Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?” ⁸And he said, “See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is at hand!’ Do not go after them. ⁹And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once.”

¹⁰Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. ¹¹There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. ¹²But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. ¹³This will be your opportunity to bear witness. ¹⁴Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, ¹⁵for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. ¹⁶You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. ¹⁷You will be hated by all for my name's sake. ¹⁸But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹By your endurance you will gain your lives.

²⁰“But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. ²¹Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, ²²for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. ²³Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. ²⁴They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

²⁵“And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, ²⁶people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

29And he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. 30As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. 31So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. 32Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. 33Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

34“But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. 35For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. 36But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

First, let’s consider the 3-signs the Lord gave concerning the coming judgment:

1. Jesus said, “**Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!'**”: This is about false messiahs; indeed, throughout history there have been 100s, even 1000s of false messiahs, men promising their followers the world. When I served as a chaplain at the state hospital in St. Louis, I met many people who claimed to be Jesus. Crazier than a bag of cats!
2. Another sign of the end, Jesus said, will be “**wars and tumults**”: War is an outcome of our fallen condition. Indeed, there has never been a time on this planet when there have not been wars. Today, there are at least 10 wars in progress and over a 100 violent conflicts around the world; nation against nation, kingdom against kingdom.
3. The third sign Jesus mentioned was “**great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences**”: This sounds like everyday news.

The signs of the coming judgment are a little vague, aren’t they. For the same signs pointed to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD and the Final Judgment: “signs in the sun and moon and stars and on earth distress of nations.” But I believe our Lord’s vagueness was intentional.

It begs the question, how would we have lived if we knew exactly when the Lord would come again? I think we would’ve lost any sense of urgency for doing the work God called us to do. We would rest on our laurels until the last possible moment. That’s our M.O.

I believe the Lord wants us to see the instability of the world and to remember how much we need him. He wants us to remember our calling to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them everything he has commanded us (Matthew 28:19-20).

With his graphic description of the final judgment, Jesus intended for us to empathize with a hurting world, to seize the moment, and to do everything in our power to bring his message of redemption to our community.

It was in the context of this message Jesus taught his disciples three things about how to do this:

1. He said, **“straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near”**;
2. he said, **“watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life”**;
3. And he said, **“stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength.”**

To **“straighten up and raise your heads because your redemption is drawing near”** means to take confidence in God’s promises of forgiveness and the Resurrection, to be courageous despite the darkness all around, to hold your head up high for your Lord reigns!

The Lord calls us his children, his sons and daughters, heirs of his Heavenly Kingdom. Take hold of that promise and relinquish everything that gets in the way of your calling from God. That’s what Jesus is saying.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor who was martyred by the Nazis, said that **“When we respond to God’s call, we intentionally separate ourselves from our previous existence in order to create a new life.”**

A **“new life”** centered on God’s call to us: No longer are we pandering to the things of the world, for we’ve been liberated from the lies, and we’ve embraced a set of values and virtues which reflect an agenda centered on the heart of God.

When I was 15 years old, my best friend, Ron Bernal, and I had great visions for our future, which included becoming fabulously rich. We spent hours talking about the kinds of investments we would make and businesses we would build. And we had a bet: We agreed that the one who got his Rolls Royce first would have the pleasure of watching the other one wash it.

But things changed. Ron served in the US Marine Corp for 24 years, going on many tours of duty, serving our country faithfully, and I became a pastor. And guess what: Neither one of us owns a Rolls Royce.

What changed for us was not whether or not we thought a Rolls Royce would be a wonderful car to own. Rather, what changed was what we each decided to do with our lives. Ron became a warrior and I became a minister. We both received God's call, and we both answered those calls, and while neither one of us became rich, we both found peace in our hearts with how the Lord used us.

That's what Jesus was talking about here. It's the elephant in the room. It's the great question that lies on each one of our hearts: What are we going to do with our lives in obedience to the call of God with this **"new life"** he's blessed us with?

Jesus said, **"watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life."**

Drugs and alcohol desensitize our hearts and minds to our greater needs. And the **"cares of this life,"** or worrying about things we cannot change, takes our attention off the things we can change.

I hesitate to bring it up because of how strong our feelings may be. However, because of the wreckage across our land I feel compelled to say a little bit about the election.

It was a disaster, but not for the reason you might think. Regardless of who one voted for, the election was a divisive, hateful, disgusting display of the darkest side of our humanity. And God's children, so many of us, got sucked into it. Like a hurricane the spirit of this thing ripped through our families and friendships, communities and cities, and it's not over yet.

Friends in Christ, what's going on in the world does not define us, the political machine does not feed us, and the false promises of men do not encourage us. The cares of this life weigh heavily on our hearts, but they should not.

That's why Jesus also said, **"stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength."** Staying awake is about remaining alert, paying attention, taking stock of what we're up against, thinking about what we're going to do about it, and praying.

Praying: It's so easy to leave God out of the picture, or, even worse, to ask him to bless us after we've already made up our minds about what we're going to do without consulting Him. But the Lord beckons us to pray **"that you may have strength."**

Going to war with pitchforks and shovels against an army with tanks, guns, and nuclear warheads would be foolish. But that is what we're doing when we go to war against the devil without prayer. Indeed, we are at war, engaged in a spiritual battle, and it's for the souls of the people of the world.

Did you notice the context of this teaching of our Lord? We read that, **Luke 21:5-6, "While some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, (Jesus) said, ⁶"As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down."**

I'm sure God was at the center of worship for the original builders of the temple. Yet over the years pride had carried the people off to another place in their hearts, a place where they no longer worshipped God but the work of their own hands. That's how Jesus found them.

Here at Palisades Lutheran Church, we're not focused on our place, as lovely as it is. Rather, our focal point is our work, how we're going to live, how we're going to love one another, how we're going to worship, how we're going to perform acts of service in our community, and how we're going to share the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

St. Peter wrote, **1 Peter 2:4-5, "As you come to (Jesus), a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."**

If only Jerusalem had understood that the temple which they held in such high esteem was only a symbol of a higher calling. Friends in Christ, this is our calling, to be a spiritual house, the house of God. Jesus is our cornerstone. Everything we are rests on Him. And in this spiritual house we find rest and salvation, redemption and peace, reconciliation and joy. We are the **"holy priesthood"** of God, bringing others into his worship.

Friends in Christ, this week as we take in the events around the world may we be filled with a sense of urgency, a sense of purpose for the mission of the Lord. He's coming soon.

This week as we study God's Word, pray, and walk with one another in faith, may we be encouraged to stand tall in this new life the Lord's called us to. He is with you always.

And this week may you have the opportunity to share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of the Lord. Amen.