

Twenty Third Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, November 13, 2022, Year C

**St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA:**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 21:5-19

***“Be Patient and Stand Firm”***

Think about this past Thursday and Friday how we were glued to our weather forecasters, our computers or even our smart-phones and tablets to see all of the pertinent signs to watch for. The question was - would this storm hit us and just how bad it might be if it did. Today, a lot of people have apps on their phones to track any storm that might be coming up the coast, or the Gulf, or whatever. We have become dependent on these things to alert us of the coming changes. In the first century Israel, the people didn't have such luxuries, they didn't have phones or computers. Communication was 'you, going to tell so and so and so.' They had no amenities to speak of, and depended on the things around them, the skies, the winds, and even how the animals reacted. Storms can make the animals act differently than normal. And so, these people were searching for signs all of the time. Have you ever noticed in your dog or cat, when there is a bad storm, especially if it is upon you, they act differently. Little Jake was a handful on Thursday and Friday, but he is back to being a little 18-week-old puppy. He is a piece of work, but he is a real blessing. It is amazing how he knew when the wind was going to let up and start up again. It really is something. Could you imagine having cattle and sheep and how they reacted. It is truly incredible.

Jesus, having just left the Temple for what would be His last time, went with His Apostles to the Mount of Olives, directly across from the Temple, crossing the Kidron Valley. The sight of the magnificent Temple was right there in front of them. I only wish that it would be there today to be able to reflect upon it, but instead that Dome of the Rock is there, and I am sorry, I just cannot get excited about the Dome of the Rock. Jesus prophesied that from that time forward, about forty years later, in what would be 70 AD, the Temple would cease to exist at all, and all of the Jews would be running for their lives from Jerusalem. Jesus comforts His followers telling them not to panic, that the end of days was not then but it would come later – and so Jesus adds the prophesy of His second coming later on, in what we call the Olivet Discourse. What Jesus said about the stones being strewn down, just take a walk by the southern steps of the Temple Mount. If Marilyn and I ever lead another trip to Israel, we will take people to the southern steps of the Temple, and you would see, through fresh excavation that has taken place, boulders and blocks that were a part of the Temple and Western Wall. You would find them strewn down on a street on which Jesus once walked. We know that this street was there in the first century and all of the debris is on top of it. From the time of His discourse, the Temple and the city of Jerusalem would never, ever, be the same. The city and the Temple would be demolished just as Jesus had predicted. The Jews would now need to reconstruct their lives, focusing on the Law, instead of the Temple and the sacrifices. They would ask for signs to know when this was coming, and believe me, they got more than they asked for.

You need to know, that right after these Gospel verses, in Luke 21:20-21, Jesus clearly prophesied of what is to come for the Temple, and the Jewish people. He said, "*When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let*

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*those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city.*” Jesus is talking about the people of Judah, the Jews, who would be scattered into all the whole world, until November 29, 1947, when the United Nations declared Israel a country once again. The Jews would have been scattered all over the world, and then there are the ones that fled to Masada, the mountain fortress near the Dead Sea, who would be exterminated by the Roman Army. It is incredible when you go to Masada, you go to one side of it, which is a very steep mountainside, of which you can go up by taking the cable car. On the other side you see the remnants of a ramp that the Romans built to go up and kill them all.

Jesus’ warnings are really meant to encourage the hearers and readers, most especially His followers, to stay close to their faith, and continue to share the truth, not being swayed by false prophets and false messiahs. These warnings are so very important, that they are recorded in not just Luke chapter 21, but also Matthew 24, and Mark 13. In each, they are almost identical, so you know they are telling people to take care and be ready. One very important warning is given by Jesus in verse 8 from today’s Gospel reading, *“And 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.”* We also need to remember the words Jesus spoke in John 15:16 *“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.”* Jesus is speaking to the people whom He has called, for them to continue in the faith, and not to trust the imposters who proclaim to be “a Christ” or “a messiah,” which means “an anointed one”, for He has given the call for us to trust in Him, and not anyone else who claims falsely to be Him. We should also remember that before long, the risen Jesus would add encouragement for His disciples when He gives His Great Commission in Matthew 28:20 saying, *“And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”* The promise to never leave or forsake His followers has to be kept close to the heart, no matter what! Always remember – He promises to be with us.

Then Jesus’ disciples put two and two together. The warning of the destruction of the Temple on one hand and the evidence of all that Jesus has said and done came to pass on the other hand. Somehow they go with each other. If Jesus has been right all along, then the Temple will have to go. But how? And when? When would the world see that Jesus really is God’s Messiah? When would the world see that we need Jesus? It would take several hundred years, but eventually even Rome would fall. Mighty Rome who conquered all would come crashing down. And their so-called gods or emperors would be seen as false gods. The Truth would clearly be seen. In Greek the word for truth is ‘alethea’ (ἀλήθεια). John 8:32, Jesus says about the truth: *“and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”* There really is no disguising the truth.

The disciples wanted to see Jesus ruling as King, with all that that would mean, including the Temple’s destruction and then, the ushering in of God’s new age, along with the promises that Jesus had been telling them. They hoped that the present age would come to its inevitable conclusion. They wanted the Romans out! They were tired of being pushed around. They wanted the new age to be born. Well, Jesus says, the birth pangs of the new age will start, in the

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form of wars, revolutions, famines and earthquakes. It is not going to be pretty! And it hasn't been, has it? I happen to believe that the end times started when the first nail was driven onto Jesus' hand, and then the stopwatch started. No one knows the hour or the day, but the Father. Terrible times are going to come, and those who follow Jesus will be tested severely. There will be some, unfortunately, who will give it all up as just too demanding, giving up the faith. We have seen the evidence. But believers shouldn't waver or be deceived. There would be people who claimed to be Jesus, who we are not to follow, not by any stretch of the imagination. Unless it is Jesus – I am not going. Jesus' followers, then and now - must hold on, keeping their nerve, and remain faithful, standing firm in faith.

Between the present moment for the disciples, and the time when all will be revealed, Jerusalem will be destroyed, the good news of the kingdom of God which Jesus came to bring will have to spread not just around Israel, but to places throughout the whole world. There is much more work to be done! Jesus said, just before He ascended to the Father, *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."* (Acts 1:8 ESV)

This statement holds true for every generation of Christians, believers in Jesus as the Messiah. We too are called to be faithful, to hold on and to not be alarmed. We too may be called to live through troubled times and to be faithful to the end. We may see the destruction of cherished and beautiful symbols. Think about what happened on 9-11, those two beautiful towers, gone! Those were marks of economy, of progress. Our calling is to hold on to Jesus Himself, in relationship with Him, to continue to trust in Him, to believe that the One who was justified by God in the first century will one day be justified before the whole world. There are still a lot of people to find out just who Jesus is. When He comes again on a cloud, there will be absolutely no doubt that He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Marilyn's kids in school were asking her "how are we going to know that it is Jesus when He says He is coming again?" She said, "you are going to know!" When He is coming on the clouds, you are not going to have to put on the TV News, but all you are going to have to do is look up! You will know it is Him. I can tell you in my heart, that when Jesus does come again, the number of people that are going to fall on their faces and talk like Thomas and say, "My Lord and My God." Just think – it is incredible. We too are called to live with the birth pangs of God's new age, and to trust that in His good time the new world will be born, and Jesus will come again to bring us to it.

Jesus promises that He will provide what we need during this time of waiting, especially *'words and wisdom.'* This promise refers to the times when people will be put on trial for their lives because of their allegiance and belief in Jesus. Think of the early Christians and the persecution that took place, even to Rome and the horrible treatment to people simply because they followed Jesus. The Emperor Nero took Christians and put them on poles, then lit them on fire – using them as 'streetlights'. They didn't live, and you know they were received into the Kingdom of Heaven – instantly. Jesus' warnings were given as encouragement to His followers in any age to come, *"But 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*

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*governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer.*" (Luke 21:12-14) Think of how in the Book of Acts, when the Apostles were arrested, Peter went before the Sanhedrin and the High Priest, and testified about "*Jesus, who you killed.*" That is just the beginning. Earlier in Luke 12:11-12, Jesus said these words of encouragement: "*And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.*" We need to remember that these words, just like His promises, are timeless, and true.

Wherever and whenever Christians are persecuted for their faith, they need the prayers and support of their fellow-believers like us, but also the comfort and encouragement of Jesus' words. In our Prayers of the People, there is a portion to pray for people who spread the Gospel, and people who are persecuted in other parts of the world. It may not be here, but it may be the life after. And so I close with the words from the Brother of Jesus, James from his Epistle, in which he wrote, "*You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.*" (James 5:8)