

The Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
November 14-15, 2009
Mark 13:1-8

“Do Not Be Alarmed”

We live in an age of great anxiety. Oh sure, we go around doing all the stuff of ordinary, everyday life – family, home, work, school, friends. But it seems that at the present there are these large overarching things looming out there which are causing great concern, anxiety, and alarm in people’s lives. Things like the economic slump that continues to plague our nation, the pandemic threat of the H1N1 virus, the terrible shootings at Ft. Hood, Texas in which the lives of thirteen people were brutally taken, the war on global terrorism in Afghanistan and other places around the world. These are but a few of the larger concerns that are out there in the world today. Besides these large, collective concerns, there are also the individual concerns and anxieties that each one of us has that bring about worry and sleepless nights. So, what’s new? “Tell us something we don’t know,” you’re probably thinking. Put yourself in the shoes (or sandals) of the disciples in today’s Gospel lesson. They are in Jerusalem, marveling at the beauty of the temple complex on Mt. Zion that dominates the city. Bear in mind that the exterior of the temple was overlaid with white marble and gold – it was a wonder to behold! The disciples say to their teacher, “Wow! Look at all this!” And their teacher replies with shocking words that are like cold water in the face: **“Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down”** (Mark 13:3). Talk about cranking up the anxiety level! But you see, that was *not* Jesus’ point – to increase the anxiety of his followers. In fact, Jesus’ point was to prepare his followers for a period of great upheaval and distress which would precede his coming again. And in preparing them, Jesus’ desire is for them to remain faithful and obedient to his mission; to remain calm in the midst of the storm until Jesus shall come again. And so the message for this day, based on Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel lesson, is entitled: **“Do not be alarmed”** (Mark 13:7). May the Lord’s rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus’ sake.

As the church year draws to a close with next Sunday being the final Sunday of the church year, the Festival of Christ the King, our attention is drawn to the last days and Christ’s coming again. This is important for us to consider because we can easily be lulled into a false sense of security in this life, thinking that things will just continue on the way they’ve always been. Our trust and confidence can easily slide from faith in Christ to material things, into ourselves. Jesus’ words come within an entire chapter (Mark 13) that focuses on the end times. Mark 13 is sometimes called the “Little Apocalypse.” The word *apocalypse* means to “unveil or disclose.” And what Jesus is unveiling or disclosing here is not just signs of the last days, but his power to sustain his people in faith during those last days. Our Lord’s desire is for his people not to be anxious and alarmed, but to be knowledgeable of the truth, prepared and ready for what lies ahead. He tells us that there will indeed be wars and rumors of war, nation rising up against nation earthquakes and famines, but not to misinterpret the significance of these events. These things must happen, according to God’s design and purpose, but they do not signify that the end is near. As Jesus tells us, **“This is but the beginning of the birth pangs”** (Mark 13:8). Jesus goes in Mark 13 to describe other things that will precede his coming again: persecution of believers; false prophets who will perform signs and wonders, leading many astray; and the powers of the heavens shaken with sun and moon darkened, and stars falling from heaven. **“And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory”** (Mark 13:26). One more very important thing must happen before Jesus comes again, found here in Mark 13. Jesus tells us: **“And the Gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations”** (Mark 13:10). This has not yet happened. According to current statistics, there are a total of 16,344 people groups in the world, and of those, 6639 are considered unreached – that is, these people have never heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ (www.joshuaproject.net). The mission is before us! We have work to do before Jesus comes again, and my friends this is the heart of what the church is all about: a loving concern and a burning passion to share the good news of God’s great love in Jesus with all people.

Our call until Jesus comes again is to be **“steadfast, immovable, abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord our labor is not in vain”** (1 Corinthians 15:58). As our congregation comes together next Sunday for our voters meeting, it is vitally important that in the Church we keep the main thing the main thing; that we not be diverted or distracted from what our primary mission is as the people of Christ until Christ shall come again: to serve as his messengers in the world.

An American tourist was traveling in northern Italy along the shores of Lake Como, and came to a large estate with a massive villa at the center. There was a friendly gardener working just outside the main gates who agreed to allow the visitor in and showed him the grounds, which the gardener kept in beautiful condition. The tourist asked where everyone was, since there were no signs of movement or life around the villa. The gardener replied that there was no one here except him, and that the owner hadn't been here for a long time. “How long?” asked the tourist. “It was twelve years ago,” the gardener said. “Does he stay in touch with you?” “No.” “Then where do you get your instructions about what to do?” “From his agent in Milan.” “Does *he* (the agent) ever show up?” “Never!” By now, the tourist was baffled by all of this. He said to the gardener, “Then who comes here?” “No one. I am almost always alone. Only once in a while a tourist, like yourself, happens to come by.” “But you keep the gardens and grounds in such fine condition, just as though you expected your master to come tomorrow.” The old gardener promptly replied, “Not tomorrow, sir, *today!* Today!” The gardener's vigilance and readiness for the arrival of his master, whenever that may be, serves as a model for us as we wait and watch for the arrival of our Master. We do not know when He will come; we only know that He will come, and He calls us to be ready.

May the Lord Jesus, who loves us with an everlasting love and laid down his life for us all on the cross, strengthen and uphold us in faith toward him and in fervent love toward one another until the end, that we may not be alarmed. **“Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful”** (Hebrews 10:23). Amen.