

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
23rd Sunday after Pentecost
November 17, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Malachi 4:1–2

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Luke 21:5–15 NRSV

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” And he said, “Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them.

“When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.” Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. “But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.

God Is Near

At first glance, the scripture selections today seem a bit sad and depressing. Both scriptures from *Malachi* and the words of Jesus draw on images of **destruction**. Action movies and most video games rely on this for their popularity. The more things tear up, the more the public seems to like it. It reminds me of the **senseless activity** of my time as a 12 year old, when I took at least half of my model airplanes, tanks, and cars and blew them up with MD-80 firebombs. The blasts were so big, I’m surprised that any of us avoided injury from flying pieces of hot plastic! These are the kinds of things that I have attributed to testosterone storms, and perhaps that was all there was to it. But, somehow at the time destroying something that I had paid for and created myself seemed more important than holding on to something from my recent childhood.

Those were not **end times**. Instead, they were less-than-appropriate entertainment for unruly teenage boys. But, Jesus does describe activity and scenes that would foretell the end and God’s apocalyptic **judgement** in the *Gospel of Luke*. In contrast, the end times are not the focus of *Malachi*. Instead, he placed emphasis on the **conquering** of those who opposed God. At their core, both messages center on religious reform. In addition, the words of Jesus foretold the eventual **destruction of the temple**, which was never reconstructed after the Romans armies tore it down to the ground in the year 70 CE. Sadly, only the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem remains.

Rather than centering on the end times, the underlying message for us in these readings is this: **Hope**. Both *Malachi* and the writer of *Luke* inform us that **God never abandons** us, even though we so often interpret events that way. And, God remains **present** with us, understands our plight, and is sympathetic to our condition. Despite this positive aspect of our faith, we often get discouraged about our current state of affairs within **the church**. In terms of religious activity today, things do not look totally rosy. And, the bleakness of the last decade makes us wonder about **the future**.

Of course, McCarter is not the only congregation facing shrinking attendance, diminished participation, and membership. Typically, we blame this on a failure to **replenish** our membership as it used to occur: through the succession of children and grandchildren who remained in the area with us and honored our commitment of regular attendance at worship. For about 100 years, the generations of faithful folks, who expanded the church rolls and expanded church buildings, had offered full and **intentional investment** of their time, energy, and resources to further the institution that we know as a congregation. But, today adult children move to better paying jobs. Or, they are across town, across the state, or into another state. They may have children, but they grow up more independently and are **less committed to**, and actually distrust, institutions including organized religion. For many, they lack exposure to the church or have been hurt deeply by rejection from a particular congregation. And, through general **indifference** most people in the United States fail to attend any church at all, even if they identify as Christian. This has led to a **shrinkage** of nearly every mainline denomination. Although they held up longer than the rest, the Southern Baptists are beginning to see a shift downward, something first noted among Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian congregations over 30 years ago.

In contrast, in the time of Jesus the worship at **the temple** was at its height. The building was a spectacle. Take in this description from the historian, Josephus:

The sacred edifice itself, the holy temple, in the central position, was approached by a flight of twelve steps.

The exterior of the building wanted nothing that could astound either mind or eye. For, being covered on all sides with massive plates of gold, the sun was no sooner up than it radiated so fiery a flash that persons straining to look at it were compelled to avert their eyes, as from the solar rays (NIB, Vol. 9, 398).

Even the outer walls of the Temple were constructed with large stones, carefully squared off and finished with a border around each exposed edge.²⁵⁰ The votive offerings included lavish gifts of ornate adornments and sacred vessels (NIB, Vol. 9, 398).

We need to realize that like the **glittering temple** before the crowd around Jesus, things can and do **change**. Today, we are in a sea-change that we cannot control. Sometimes, we feel as if we are holding on to the mast of the ship that is taking on water and being driven back by the wind.

And yet, often we have periods of calm and **brightness** here in our **worship**. A local resident cannot make it across town to their home church, and **we welcome** them. They may not return until Christmas Eve, but the main thing I take away is that **they came** at all! And, importantly they see us as a **beacon** in the night during **Advent** and attend our candlelight service on Christmas Eve. In this situation, we have served literally as the **light that shines** in the darkness.

And, we can look forward to a couple who move in nearby from far out of town. They **attend worship** as visitors, and they realize that they truly enjoy **traditional worship** and that their experience in congregations in the **Presbyterian Church (USA)** have been uniformly positive. McCarter is a short distance from their home. And, they join us and attend regularly. No matter their demographic, they are anxious to **participate in our ministry** and hope to expand their involvement in our **missional living**.

- What is our **response**?
- Do we contribute **our time and energy** to them, investing emotionally with them, exploring mission and **ministry** with them?
- After we greet them warmly, do we join them in their **excitement** for ministry?
- Or, do we pull back wondering if this new situation is going to last, thinking only of what used to be, instead of what might be now and in **the future**?

Indeed, in this situation **the future** is staring right back at us, literally.

Both Jesus and Malichi were looking to the future. They had profound, deep, messages for the people: **God** is Here! God **remains** with us. God **never leaves** us. This means that we are to live in **hope**. Even when it is difficult to see it in the words of Jesus, as we find most of our scripture lesson today, Jesus is still assuring us that God is **present** with us. Christ promised the **Holy Spirit** to us. And, the apostles and the early followers of Jesus showed the effects of the Spirit in ways that could not be imagined. Simply read the first three chapters in the *Book of Acts*, and you readily will see that these folks had a new and different take on life and living and **servng one another**.

Like the shattered and lonely **disciples** after the crucifixion, you and I can become **downcast** easily. But, Jesus tells us that even when that happens, we have the ability to rise to the occasion and **continue living**: We must live into the **promise** of God in **Jesus Christ**. And, that is our hope: not in ourselves, but in guidance from God's Spirit. In the past when the leaders of most congregations hired a pastor, they did it to do the work of the church. Then, as now, the pastor was the face in **the community**. Instead of focusing on discipleship and a theological basis for giving, the stewardship season often was treated as a **fundraiser**. In those days, the United Way, Red Cross, and many other worthy causes did not compete directly with churches when individuals determined their **contributions**. Because no one wanted to discuss giving an commitment, the results of the efforts towards stewardship were often lackluster.

Some of this superficial treatment of **faith and commitment** came from the trends in leadership at the time. Those leaders and pastors had a real hierarchal, or top-down, approach to being the church. The emphasis was on keeping as many people happy as possible and **avoiding conflict** altogether. Today, our congregations are the legacy of that organization and leadership. The top down, pastor-led model of being the church is **no longer effective**. It probably never was, or most congregations would not be struggling. The stones of that edifice, that plan, that type of ministry have already been **torn down**.

Today, the difficulty lies in this: We all want to **go back** to it. It felt really warm and fuzzy. But, it could not hold up under the stress of a **changing society** and a shift from the trends of that time after World War II: It was popular to join groups like lodges, civic groups, and churches, in contrast, today individuals and families tend to remain independent, preferring to stand alone and take care of themselves first with institutions, like congregations, remaining a distant 4th or 5th on their list of priorities.

But, what has not changed is the **presence of God**. We have difficulty seeing it through the smoke and haze of our **memories**, but God was with us thirty years ago. **God remains** with us now! And, just as he did on the temple steps 2000 years ago **Jesus** points us directly to God's manifestation as the **Holy Spirit**. Despite upsetting and permanent changes that distress us, **God is still with us**. Christ calls us to serve him and all the children of God who lie before him. And, that is our **hope** and our mainstay.

Jesus tells us something that echoes the prophet Malachi: We continue in hope, because the **Spirit of God** remains present with us all. Forty years after Jesus spoke these words, Jerusalem lay in ruins and the Jewish people were scattered throughout the known world. As bad as that was, God was **still God**. And, today you and I are witnesses to that staying power. You and I can continue to live in hope, because the church called by Christ has survived **famine**, earthquakes, the **destruction of governments** and civil law, world wars, nuclear blasts, natural disasters, and a seemingly endless series of **human-caused disasters** which we endure today: senseless shootings and mass murders. Because **God is near**, the church called by Christ remains with us and **calls to us**. It is worthy of our full consideration. It is worthy of our time, our talents, and our **resources**. It is worthy of devotion and our living in ministry **in Christ**.

The prophet Malachi said that we will go out like **calves leaping**. I think I gave up that expression of joy some time ago. But, **my heart** still leaps every time I hear from each of you. I am filled with **joy** that I can prepare worship and speak **God's Word**. I receive more **blessings** than I can consider imparting to anyone, just by being among you with **God's Spirit**.

In these verses, Jesus says, Take heart. These are **not the end times**. When they come, you will know it. And, if we understand that God has all power and knows all things, then you and I can live in hope, look to the future, and continue to **give from our hearts** to the church called **by Christ**.

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