

Spur One Another On

In the text we heard earlier today, the writer of Hebrews makes a statement which I think is particularly important for the day and age in which we live. He writes, “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching,” (Heb.10:24-25). Friends, I don’t need to tell you this, you already know it, but we have people who are more focused on being at the Fellowship of St. Mattress than here at New Hope this morning. It’s a decision about what we view as important. I’m glad you all see coming together each week to worship as something important. You’ve got your priorities lined up in that regard.

This has been a common, recurring problem for the Church since the very beginning. So as you look around, and see friends scattered throughout the sanctuary, with lots of space between them, don’t be alarmed. You’re in good company. This has been going on since the Church started nearly 2,000 years ago. Another thing the Church has been fascinated with since the Resurrection of Christ, has been the coming of God’s Kingdom, and trying to make predictions of when that might be. So this morning, we’re going to read what Jesus says about this in Mark’s Gospel, and then talk some about it. If you have your Bible or Bible app handy, turn with me to Mark 13:1-8. **Read Mark 13:1-8.**

Back when I was in high school around 9:00 in the evenings on weeknights the commercials on TV would shift from selling products to pay-per-call scammers. There was one in particular which I always thought was funny. Miss Cleo, on “The Psychic Hotline,” was a Jamaican lady who would tell you your future for something like \$2.95 per minute, which was an astronomical amount of money in those days. Some of you may remember Miss Cleo, and her, “Call me now!” sales pitch.

Fascination with the Future

When I was a kid working at the Spot, I worked with a guy who decided to call her. He wanted to know if he’d be a millionaire and get a good-looking girlfriend. I could’ve answered at least part of the question for him – you’ll never be a millionaire flipping burgers at the Spot. Anyhow, this guy called her, and waited on hold for a half hour before she finally got on the phone, and you know what she asked him? “Hi, who is this?” Wouldn’t you think a psychic should know that? So he hung up, and the next month his folks got a \$300 charge on their phone bill from the Psychic Hotline.

We have – even the disciples had – a fascination with the future, especially with things we can physically see and experience. This is what’s happening at the opening

of our Gospel lesson this morning. “As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, ‘Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!’” (Mark 13:1). They were in awe at the magnitude of the place. It would be like us visiting the Sistine Chapel in Rome, I suppose. We’d be stunned with all the beauty around us.

The temple in those days was a breathtaking work of human ingenuity and craftsmanship. It was built on the highest hill of Jerusalem, of limestone and marble blocks that were the size of a mini-van. The temple that Jesus and the disciples were leaving and talking about that day was the third version of it. King David had designed the original version, which was built by his son, King Solomon. That temple was destroyed by the Babylonians when they carried the people into the Exile.

The Beautiful Temple

The second temple was smaller, and was worked on by Ezra and Nehemiah once the Persians allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem. It had been the center of Jewish faith for 500 years or so, and then along came King Herod. Known to history as Herod the Great, because of his willingness to follow Rome’s directions and keep the Jewish people complacent with Roman rule, he’s the guy from the Gospel record, who orders the killing of all the boys in Bethlehem age two and under because the Magi came and said they were looking for Jesus – the One born King of the Jews. To keep the Jews calm during his reign, Herod spent 45 years updating and refitting the temple in Jerusalem. He expanded it, added to it, and made it a monument of his rule. And the Jewish religious leaders loved it! In its time, Herod’s temple in Jerusalem was more lavish and spectacular than anything even in Rome.

The place had a gold dome that reflected the sunlight for miles around. The inside consisted of polished cedar from Lebanon, copious amounts of gold, silver, and bronze utensils and items for use in worship. In the center of the compound was the Holy of Holies – a place that had walls of gold, with an altar, the ark of the covenant, and bowls of solid gold – which the chief priest could only enter one day of the year. Separating that from the sanctuary space of the temple was the Veil. It was a woven tapestry of dark blue and crimson fabric which portrayed the stars and constellations of the night sky over Jerusalem. The place was breathtaking. And the disciples were dazzled with the beauty of it.

“Do you see all these great buildings?’ replied Jesus. ‘Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down,’” (verse 2). This must have been jarring to their ears to hear Jesus say this. These guys are envisioning a new kingdom – a messianic kingdom – in which Jesus is King, and they are all in His cabinet, ruling from this spectacular temple complex in Jerusalem. Instead, Jesus tells them something they really don’t want to hear, and never expected to hear.

Needing a Checklist

So the inner circle, or leadership team of the disciples, if you will, talk with Jesus about it. “As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked Him privately, ‘Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?’” (verses 3-4). See, the disciples want to know. The Church wants to know. We want to know when Jesus is coming back. We would like to have a very precise measure of time.

Sometimes I think we do this so that we know how long we can lollygag around before we have to get serious about stuff. I really think a lot of the focus people put on the rapture and end times stuff is a subconscious desire to know how much longer can they horse around before getting burned. If we’ve got that mindset, the answer’s real clear – now is the time to get real, to get serious, and turn our life over to God through faith in Jesus Christ. Notice what Jesus does in the Scripture, and what He doesn’t do.

He doesn’t give them a checklist telling them, “first this gets done, and then that, and then the other thing.” Entire ministries in the Western Church have been built on some televangelist putting together checklists of what’s going to happen before Jesus comes, and if you call their number on the bottom of your TV screen, they’d be happy to send it to you for \$19.95 plus shipping and handling. Friends, that’s not the Gospel. That’s not from Christ. If we truly love Jesus, and truly knew the exact time of His return, wouldn’t we be telling that for free?

Look what Jesus says here:

Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in My name, claiming, “I am He,” and will deceive any. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning birth pains, (verses 5-8).

Wrong Predictions

Have you ever heard a confident prediction – a prophecy to use the Biblical term – that turned out to be terribly inaccurate? I found a few examples on Google. On December 4, 1941, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox was talking to the press, and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, I don’t know what’s going to happen, but I can tell you this with great assurity. Whatever happens we will not be surprised. The American Navy is ready.” Three days later, on December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii and sank 21 ships of the Pacific Fleet, and destroyed 75% of the planes on the airfields surrounding Pearl Harbor. The attack killed 2,403 servicemen and women, and wounded another 1,104 people.

In 1943, IBM’s president, Thomas Watson, said, “I think there is a world market for maybe five computers.” Today, everyone has them in their pockets. In 1962, Decca

Records rejected the Beatles, telling them, “Guitar groups are on the way out.” Here’s another one: in 2007, Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson said, “We are fortunate that our economy is resilient.” And then the financial crisis hit, and the Government had to bail out the automotive industry.

Even experts, including government officials, can get things wrong. Our human predictions – including those of the televangelists – are fallible. We make mistakes. Jesus, though, is spot on. The temple was destroyed in AD 70, and fulfilled the prophecy in our Gospel lesson. It shocked the Jewish world. No matter how massive and impressive our earthly institutions seem to be, they are temporary. The Titanic’s another example. When it was built, they said it was “unsinkable,” but it sank on its first voyage.

Do Not Be Alarmed

Our human achievements can fail, no matter how grand they seem. What Jesus does in the Gospel lesson today is He challenges us to place our hope not in worldly structures or forecasts, but in God’s eternal plan. He speaks of wars, earthquakes, and famines. These are terrible things. Yet He says they are “the beginning of birth pains.” Even though these events cause us naturally to fear the future, Jesus says, “Do not be alarmed.”

Each generation has faced events that seemed in their time to signal the end of the world. The world has seen many wars over the years. America has been involved in some. The Revolutionary War, the Civil War, World War I, and World War II. Sickness and widespread disease. Pandemics like the Spanish flu of the early 1900’s and COVID-19 a few years ago. Economic collapses like the Great Depression, and the recession of the early 2000’s. Yet history shows us that these moments, while significant, are not the end. They are part of a larger unfolding story of a world in rebellion, yet still under God’s control.

So how do we live out Christ’s teaching – to love God and love others – when we’re faced with troubling events? First, we trust in God’s rule. We’ll talk more on this next week. Jesus is on the throne. Nothing surprises Him. Wars, disasters, and political turmoil and upheaval are all within His control.

Secondly, we stay rooted in Scripture. We do that by reading the Bible daily. By coming together regularly to worship together and hear the word of God preached and proclaimed. His word reminds us of His promises and helps us see beyond the immediate troubles to the greater plan He has laid out for us for eternity.

Thirdly, we live into our faith. We do that by being lights in the darkness. By coming together, and allowing ourselves to be used as instruments by God. In times of uncertainty, our faith in action will inspire others to find hope in Jesus Christ – and this

is what we should want for all people – not to hoard it only for ourselves or our immediate families.

God's Word Never Fails

We can learn a lot from the failed predictions of famous people. They show us the limits of human understanding. They may reveal notions of overconfidence in technology, misjudging trends, deeply held stereotypes of groups of people, or failing to foresee crises, our wisdom is faulty. Only God alone knows all things.

His word, and His wisdom is unfailing. Isaiah 40:8 says, “The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.” When we hear terrible, terrifying predictions – whether it’s about the economy, the environment, or world peace – remember, only God knows the future. Trust His plan, rather than human speculation. Really, that’s what a lot of it is – it’s a best guess, which oftentimes turns out to be wrong.

When we hear and see all the negativity in the world, remember Jesus’ words: “Do not be alarmed.” Instead, draw near to God, hold fast to your hope, and encourage one another to stand firm in faith. I want to leave you with a closing question – at school we would call this a homework assignment. When you see known – and unknown – neighbors out and about this week, how can you encourage them to trust in God’s unshakable promises?

Prayer: Lord, Thank You for being our anchor in an unpredictable world. Help us to trust in Your promises, to hold fast to our hope, and to encourage one another in faith. Strengthen us to be lights in the darkness, pointing others to Your eternal truth. Amen.