

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
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Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
November 18, 2007
Luke 21:5-28 (Proper 28 C)

“The Once and Future City”
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

Once again we are approaching the end of another church year. Though our Thanksgiving observance interposes itself the Gospel lessons for the last Sundays of the church year always focus on the end—not the end of a year, but the end of the world, the last judgment and the return of our Lord. This is especially apparent in today’s Gospel. Yet there is a special emphasis in the Gospel lesson on Jerusalem as a sign and type of the judgment of God. As I considered this text though, another point concerning Jerusalem came to mind and is the basis for our theme: The Once and Future City. May the Lord bless us as we consider His Word.

I. The Judgment on Jerusalem

In the days leading up to his crucifixion, Jesus engaged in many meaningful discussions with his disciples and his opponents in the vicinity of the Temple in Jerusalem. In our text for today, the Lord responds to those admiring the wonder and glory of the building of the Temple with the word that “there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” That leads the shocked listeners to ask when will this happen and what will be the signs when this is about to take place?

The Lord in his response goes from the general to the specific. Do not be led astray he says. There will be false prophets who will say, “I am He” and “The time is at hand”. Don’t listen to them. There will be wars and tumults, nation will raise against nation, kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes, famines, and plagues. There will be signs in the heavens. And they will persecute the believers in Christ and bring them to trial. But this will be an opportunity for witness. Some will even be betrayed by family and friends. Some will be put to death. Here Jesus is speaking of the persecution which would come to the church and the test which would face them. But in the midst of these trials is the promise: “By your endurance you will gain your lives.”

Then the Lord gets more specific, “when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that the desolation has come near.” His next words are very specific, “Flee to the mountains ... those in the city depart ... those in the country not enter it.” It will be terrible times. “Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days!” And Jerusalem would be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles.

As Jesus predicted, so it was for the city that once was. In 70 A.D. during the days of Titus, the Roman general, the war that broke out between the Jews and the Roman empire led to

terrible destruction and death. The historian Josephus chronicles the horrors of those trapped by the siege in the city of Jerusalem. Indeed some people even resorted to cannibalism in their great hunger. And as Jesus said, the Temple was destroyed. Not one stone was left standing upon another. The judgment was complete. And the earlier word of Jesus was fulfilled: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who stone the prophets and kill those sent to you, how often would I have gathered you as a mother hen gathers her chicks under her wing, but you would not. Now is your house left unto you desolate." And in the destruction of Jerusalem is a warning to the world in general. Do not despise the word of the Lord. Do not reject the salvation offered. But perhaps that destruction is too far removed from our generation for it to have much effect. The destructions even of the last world war, of Dresden and Hamburg, Tokyo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki are so far in the past that we cannot grasp the stark warnings those events should signify.

II. The Judgment in General

At the close of our text, Jesus proceeds to warning about the judgment of the world. "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, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." Here is the Lord speaking of the final judgment. How interesting it is that in many places this would be a subject totally ignored. People today are so involved with their investments, their entertainments, their lives of pleasure or desperation. Or they are just too apathetic to care. Maybe they have heard some of the sensationalistic and less than Scriptural descriptions of the last days and dismiss it as just plain foolishness. The last thing they want to hear about is a judgment to come. In the Old Testament lesson, the prophet Malachi is also direct: "For behold the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and the evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch." The judgment will be complete. Just as Jerusalem reeled under the wrath of God, so will it be for the world at the end of days. For the One who predicted the fall of the city of Jerusalem is also the one who will come in a cloud with great power and glory. So the constant theme in the Scriptures, "be watchful! Be ready!" You do not know the day or the time.

The Future City: Our Hope

Yet there is a hope in these words as well. While not directly saying it they point us to the future city. Jesus tells his listeners in the closing words of the Gospel: "Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." The prophet Malachi also speaks of the hope of the redeemed: "But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall." The sun of righteousness is the Son of Man, our Lord Jesus Christ and in him is the hope at the end of our earthly lives and the end of all things in

this present age.

That brings us to the future city. It is interesting that while Jerusalem is brought to judgment as prophesied by the Lord, the city is also the hope of the redeemed. It is not the earthly city, but the heavenly Jerusalem. That is why several of the hymns we sing today speak of that Jerusalem. They stand in sharp contrast to the woes of the city that once was. For the writer to the Hebrews reminds us: "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." (Heb.12:22-24) And in the book of Revelation, St. John has the vision of heaven: "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." (Rev. 21:2) There is the hope in a time of trial and persecution. There is the hope for all those who love the Lord Jesus and are loved by him. There is the assurance of the final victory. For it is not the end, but the beginning. The so-called glories of this age will fall into dust. The city that once was will fade into insignificance before the city that will be. And we by His grace will be there with Him forevermore.

As we sang in the last stanza of Jerusalem, O City Fair and High:

Unnumbered choirs before the shining throne
Their joyful anthems raise
Till heaven's arches echo with the tone
Of that great hymn of praise
And all its host rejoices,
And all its blessed throng
Unite their myriad voices
In one eternal song.

In Jesus' name. Amen.