

26TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

NOVEMBER 17, 2013

THE END IS THE BEGINNING

Pastor Jim Dunn

Luke 21:5-28

Jesus Foretells Destruction of the Temple

5 And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, **6** “As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

7 And they asked him, “Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?” **8** 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. **9** And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once.”

Jesus Foretells Wars and Persecution

10 Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. **11** There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. **12** 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 governors for my name's sake. **13** This will be your opportunity to bear witness. **14** Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, **15** for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. **16** You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. **17** You will be hated by all for my name's sake. **18** But not a hair of your head will perish. **19** By your endurance you will gain your lives.

Jesus Foretells Destruction of Jerusalem

20 “But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. **21** Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, **22** for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. **23** Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. **24** They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

The Coming of the Son of Man

25 “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, **26** people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. **27** And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. **28** Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

“And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified...”

Well, Brad Pitt did not come. But, he did send a video message including a shout-out to the Kansas City Chiefs. Up until a couple of days prior, I didn't think many of us would be able to get in since it is still technically a hard hat area. But the ribbon-cutting ceremony for Bancroft School last Saturday was still a moving event. One employee said that it was a very emotional day for him. He once attended Bancroft School. When the school was closed years ago, folks like him must have wondered what would happen to this once beautiful red brick building. Would it ever be used again? Or, was it the end of it? Would it be demolished, “not one brick left upon another”? When I walked inside the Bancroft a year ago, it didn't look very usable. It looked old and uncared for. Its classrooms were silent. The chalkboards were empty. There was nothing hanging on the hooks that once held raincoats, backpacks, and lunch kits.

A year ago, who could have pictured that silent classrooms would become beautiful apartments with 14-foot tall windows and shiny wood floors? Who could have seen that chalkboards would become headboards and coat racks would become wood trim, chair rail with character? When the building was closed up for good in 2000, who could foresee that that ending would one day become a new beginning not only for the people who will now live there but also for the neighborhood as a whole? Endings happen. Whether it's the closing of a school, or getting down to the last days on a job, or reaching the last page in that book you've been reading, endings happen. In most cases, an ending means life goes on. Can it mean more than that? Sometimes, an ending means life does not go on. Dare we believe that those endings are more than that? Do you dare hold out the hope that each one of your endings is actually a beginning?

Near the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, He spoke to His disciples about the end of two things people have held onto as constants: the Temple in Jerusalem and time itself. He spoke of that day when armies would surround Jerusalem and when not one stone of the Temple would be left upon another. He spoke of those signs in the church, in the nations, and in nature that point to the end of time. The Temple in Jerusalem was one of those constants in life that people counted on. The way travelers of that day would count on the North Star for their navigation. The Temple was Israel's north star. Adorned with huge stones, it was not only beautiful. It stood for the permanence of God and His people Israel. It was like a mighty fortress. The Temple was where Israel worshiped Yahweh, the God who calls Himself "I am who I am." The Temple would be where Israel would take refuge when the Roman armies in AD70 surrounded Jerusalem.

We, too, have refuges, constants that we count on. We have our routine, our usual schedule, our usual rhythm of our week. We have our usual driving routes, the familiar place where we live, the familiar and loving faces of the loved ones we live with, the usual tasks and jobs, and the people we're used to seeing on a regular basis. We have those constants of mind and body that we count on. The usual ways we feel. The way that the parts of our body usually work. While other things change, these are the constants we count on.

But as in the case of the Temple in Jerusalem, sometimes a constant we count on comes to an end. Our north star falls or flickers out. A refuge collapses. Some part of our body fails or goes haywire, or our comfortable routine is disrupted, or a familiar face is suddenly gone from our sight. We experience the end of something we had come to count on. Does that end feel like a beginning?

Probably not. Endings make us feel anxious. Endings make us feel fearful. Endings make us worry about how we'll handle it. And how the other people in our life will handle it, perhaps even if they have shown us they'll be okay. Telling ourselves to not feel anxious about an ending is not helpful.

When Jesus spoke to His disciples about the end of the Temple and told them "Do not be terrified," He wasn't telling them how to feel about that ending. "Do not be terrified" spoke of something deeper than feelings. Jesus' words spoke of that defiant hope that a person has when facing an end because they've been given refuge in the wounds of Christ, because they've been given a constant in the wounds of Christ, because they've been given as their north star the wounds of Christ. Jesus spoke of that defiant hope a person has when facing an end, because they've been given refuge in better stones than the Temple. Namely, the stones of the empty tomb. And the living stones that will never be toppled because we the church are like "living stones built upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles with Christ Himself as the cornerstone, being built together in Him to become a holy temple...a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit." (1 Peter 2:5, Ephesians 2:20-22)

Such defiant hope sees the end of time as a beginning, sees the Last Day as the day of the redemption of our bodies and the redemption of all of God's creation to be as they were in the beginning. Such defiant hope sees the signs of the end of time in the church and in nations and in nature as not only signs of the end. Yes, they are signs of the end of our constants. So, earthquakes shake the ground that we count on for stability. Those constant sources of our food are affected by famines. The constant of physical health is infected by pestilences. Those constants we count on for light, the sun, moon, and stars will be shaken. That constant source of food that we also count on for transporting the world's commerce, the sea, will become the roaring sea.

Yes, these signs are and have been ever since the destruction of the Temple in AD70, signs of the end of our constants, signs of the end of time. But defiant hope sees these signs also as signposts for faith and hope, serving to tell us that Jesus is on His way with a new beginning. If a friend tells us he's coming for a visit, but he has a long way to travel, he doesn't give us an exact time of arrival. Instead, he phones periodically. When we get his calls, one after another, we take them as signs that he is still on the way. Well, the shaking of the creation, these signs in nature, are signs that Jesus is still on the way. The creation is crying out for its redemption. These signs are signposts that Jesus is still on the way.

So is the end of each constant in your personal life. Each ending of a constant in your life is a sign to you that Jesus is on the way with a new beginning. Defiant hope dares to see each ending as a beginning. Dares to see each ending as a new task. A new task in which Jesus is on the way to us through His Word and the Lord's Supper and prayer to direct us.

"With the Lord begin your task. Jesus will direct it."

The end is the beginning. The end is the beginning of a new task. It certainly may not feel like that. Endings, particularly the end of what has been a constant in your life, will make you feel anxious. Deeper and stronger inside of you than your feelings is that defiant hope that is the product of your Constant Refuge, your Mighty Fortress, your Savior, who builds defiant hope inside of you brick upon brick and stone upon stone, the hope by which He will direct each new task in your life.

Amen.