

Pentecost 23, Year C,

Sermon by Rev. Glenn A. Brumbaugh

17th November, 2019

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 NIV / Luke 21: 5-19 NIV

Security. It's something we all seek, something we all value.

We all like those things in our lives that we can count on,

rely on when everything else is topsy-turvy.

As human beings, we are hard-wired to arrange our perception of the world

into well-defined categories that make sense

of the random chaos of all the information

we are bombarded with on a daily basis.

Our primitive brains need to determine at any given time

whether there is danger present, whether fight or flight is necessary.

As an outgrowth of that basic instinct,

our higher thought processes develop attachment

to those things we can rely on as being safe and secure,

those things that never change.

For many of us, those are things that are at the core of how we define ourselves.

Our immediate family and friends, our home, our culture or country

are all things we often think of as immutable,

things that don't change that we can count on always being there

no matter what.

Yet is that really true?

Can we truly depend on those items never changing,
always being there for us to count on?

What we put our trust and faith in is central
to what Jesus has to teach in our gospel lesson this morning.

In that story, Jesus is teaching with the disciples at the Temple in Jerusalem.

They are marvelling at the grandeur of that great building,
taking in the breathtaking aspect
of that feat of architecture and engineering.

It was truly a grand sight to behold.

Much like those of us who have been fortunate enough to travel
and see such wonders as the Parthenon, or the Acropolis,
the Pyramids at Giza, Mount Rushmore,
and any of the other many feats of human engineering,
they were in awe.

Such formidable grand structures made of materials such as solid marble
seem indestructible,

Yet Jesus debunks that myth we create for ourselves.

Nothing in this world lasts forever.

Any security we seek here is unreliable.

He tells the disciples that this grand monument created by man will soon be eradicated;
not one stone will stand on another.

And within a generation that prediction became reality.

A fact the author of Luke knew all too well,

writing 15 years or so

after the Romans razed the Temple to the ground

and looted the opulent contents back as trophies to Rome.

But Jesus goes on to warn of false prophets, wars, earthquakes,

famine, pestilence, and tribulations.

He doesn't paint a very pretty picture.

In fact, there doesn't seem to be anything that can be secure,

that one can put one's trust in.

On the surface, it is not a very hopeful image of the future.

This passage has often been lumped in

with all the other apocalyptic writings of the Bible

as a laundry list of events that will herald Christ's return

and the end of times.

Yet a careful reading reveals that Jesus isn't really making that statement.

There's no timeline mentioned, no events to tick off a rapture list.

Jesus isn't responding to the question of his return,

he's responding to the question of when the Temple will be destroyed.

From our 21st century perspective, we read this passage

and look to the future for these events, but for the first readers of Luke,

these were current events.

They witnessed first hand the Jewish revolts,
the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans, and the destruction of the Temple.

For them, this was not end time prophecy, but the reality they lived in.

This lesson was more about how to endure

when everything you've counted on,

everything that would last forever, was gone:

the center and symbol of your faith, your nation, and your culture.

Even your family and friends could betray you.

Let's not forget those first generations of Christians

were following a new path,

different than the religions of their families and friends.

In their eyes, these first followers were following a path of heresy,

and often were shunned by those closest to them.

There was no safe haven.

The very nature of living out your faith

could result in persecution and death.

Sounds pretty bleak, doesn't it?

But there is a ray of hope in the story.

While they may face persecution from their world and religious leaders,

in the process of that trial, the attention will be on them.

They will have the opportunity to bear witness,

to give testimony to a different way of being.

Sharing the good news that it doesn't have to be about war and violence,
attack and revenge.

That there can be a world based on love.

A community not based on privilege and power,
but compassion and service to others.

Membership in that community is not easy, it requires work.

The writer of 2 Thessalonians points out in our reading today
the downside of getting caught up in endtime thinking.

Seeing the many calamities of the world around them,
many in the early church thought the end was very near,
just around the corner.

So what was the purpose in maintaining the work they were called to
if Jesus was going to bring an end to things someday soon.

They might as well just kick back
and enjoy the time they had left in this world, right?

Yet, this is kind of what Jesus is getting at in this passage from Luke.

We still have a job to do. We still have a witness to share.

We have our part to play in the community we're called to.

It's interesting to note that the Greek word translated as idleness, *ataktos*,
literally means "without order."

So this attitude among some in the church at Thessalonica
could be causing disorder within the community.

They had a mission and work to support that,
and this lack of participation and attitude was detracting
from that mission and purpose;
it was affecting the community as a whole.

While we've often used this passage to support our proud Protestant work ethic,
this scripture has more to do
with being an active participant in the body of Christ,
the community of faith charged with being a witness to the world.

And as Jesus foretold, there were plenty of false teachers and prophets around
to claim the end was near,
claiming that they had the inside track to God's timeline and schedule.

Since the end was near,
why bother working away supporting the community.
Just relax and enjoy yourself.

You've been baptized and got your ticket to heaven,
and there's not much time to make any more difference here.

Those voices have been around since the beginning.

History is full of end time evangelists and prophets,
who led groups of Christians to prepare for an end that never came.

While I was in seminary, one of those predictions was for May of 2011.

Unfortunately, my professor still felt we needed
to complete our final papers

even if the due date fell after the rapture.

Of course, you know I was the one who would pose such a question.

But perhaps Professor Hornbacker had a better grasp

of what Jesus was getting at in this passage in Luke

than the man who came up with that date did.

To make these apocalyptic prophecies into future timelines takes them out of context.

These were teachings in real time

with people living into turmoil and the violent upheaval

of all that anchored their lives.

Salvation and security was to be found in keeping on task,

on the witness and testimony of living out their faith in community,

that was how they saved the hairs on their head from harm.

So where do we anchor ourselves? Where do we find security?

Is it in the buildings we have built, the nations and cultures we align ourselves with?

Those in our lives we are closest to?

The message Jesus presents today is that the only constant in this world is change.

Someday this building will be gone,

someday this nation and culture will fade away.

Even those closest to us can drift away or become estranged.

The only constant we can count on is our life of faith together,

and the promise of that faith.

The promise of a different life of love in contrast to the empty life the world offers.

The promise of a life not bound by and slave to the rules of this world,
one that does not end with this world.

The question is, can we choose the security that life offers,
and let go of our attachment to the false security we find
in the fleeting foundations we make for ourselves in this life.

Because it's not this building that matters, it's what happens in this building,
and even more important, what's happening from this building that matters.
It's not this country and culture that matter,
but how we choose to live and witness here that matters.

2 Thessalonians makes clear this is a salvation that comes with work, not idleness.

We are expected to do more than just show up for an hour on Sunday.

We are expected to contribute in whatever way we are able
to continue God's mission in this world,
to testify to the different life God calls us all to.

Our retirement begins when we enter into glory.

I hope and pray each of us accepts that challenge,
and does their part, in whatever way they are able,
to make this a community that is faithful in its witness
to be that strong anchor
in the ever shifting sea of a changing world. Amen.