

Lectionary 33 B
November 17, 2024

Daniel 12:1-3; Psalm 16; Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13:1-8

Grace and peace to you, from our God, who calls us together and sends us out.

The year was 1964. Freshman year in college was almost at an end and the world was an exciting place. In fact, the world was coming to my own back yard: Flushing Meadow in Queens was once again to be the home of the World's Fair for two seasons and the construction had been a source of excitement and anticipation for a long time.

Everything seemed to emanate from the Unisphere, an enormous stainless-steel globe, girded by three orbiting rings in tribute to the space flights of Glenn and Gagarin and the first tele-communications satellite. At night a light marked the capital of each nation, and the reflecting pool bathed the globe in color, welcoming all. Exhibits were gathered from around the world and around the decades, offering a peek into the past and a dream of the future. It was a place to explore, to taste foods and savor the cultural flavor of far-off places - and to imagine what it would be like to live elsewhere.

There were waffles from Belgium and dancers from Thailand. A monorail scooted us around the park; a moving walkway led us past Michelangelo's Pieta; steel and glass elevators carried us high up to the NY state pavilion with its brightly tiled dome; and the observation deck offered a view not

only of the fairgrounds but also of the newest state of the art baseball park, Shea Stadium.

The future looked exciting: beginning with that picture phone and the interconnected highway system that would enable us to drive without delay, anywhere in the country. And of course there was the promise of more to come: we would one day see flying cars, Jetson-like back packs to transport us to school, robot laborers in our factories and homes. We might live in an underwater city and visit Mars - anything was possible.

Well, as you can imagine some sixty years later, the vendors are gone, as are most of the buildings. The Unisphere is standing, still rust free, thanks to that stainless steel and a two million dollar restoration project in the early 2000's. The dome of the state pavilion did not fare as well: its tiled roof collapsed in the 70's and its elevators were unused and unusable for decades, although after several false starts a restoration is underway and parts of the building are open. Shea Stadium is now a parking lot for the newer state-of-the-art Citi Field stadium, although given our attention span for "new" it, too, will soon be outdated. The refilled reflecting pool is lovely, although the drought has its fountains turned off most of the time. And although I do love Zooming on the computer with my grandchildren, there is still no sign of a flying car in my garage, and I fully expect long delays on that wonderful highway system when we travel south for Thanksgiving.

Accurate prediction and guaranteed permanence are just not in the cards for us human prognosticators, any more than they were for those starry-eyed disciples gazing on the Jerusalem temple.

We all should know better.

That amazing temple was indeed a wonder of the world, but it was actually in its third life, so its demise was not a new concept. The original temple had been planned by David and constructed by his son Solomon. It was truly exquisite, but in fact it was leveled by Nebuchadnezzar when the Israelites were exiled into Babylon in 597 BCE. A smaller, more modest version was rebuilt on their return, and sufficed for 500 years or so amid regular sighs of nostalgia for the grandeur of the old one. Then Herod the Great, embarked on a temple renovation, as much for his own reputation as for a worthy place of worship. It was this renovation that produced the amazing stonework the disciples were remarking on. The temple was simply breathtaking, gilded with so much gold that one could hardly look directly at it in the sunlight. And the stones were enormous, archaeologists say, perhaps the size of an SUV! Not one stone left on another? Impossible!

And yet, Jesus is right: the walls will tumble, and the temple will not again be rebuilt. It is a sobering thought that even today the site of the temple, now a mere portion we call the western wall, stands in the middle of the Arab-Israeli conflict, holy to both and threatened still by the wars and rumors of wars of today's human kingdoms.

Jesus is not, however, in the business of doomsday predictions. The signs of when and how that the disciples crave are not the signs that Jesus pays attention to. Jesus is calling them to be prepared for the distress that will come along as part of the brokenness of humanity and the resistance of human beings to repentance, their refusal to return to God's ways. Jesus is calling them to bring the good news of Jesus to the world around them in the midst of those wars and earthquakes, that violence and upheaval.

Their call to follow will not provide a primrose path. It will not guarantee them safety or immunity from harm. It will not guarantee peace nor prevent natural disasters. And still, they are not to fear: *[D]o not be alarmed; he says, this must take place, but the end is still to come.*

Easier said than done, of course. We might know in our heads that life will bring change and sometimes pain. We certainly know that destruction can come unexpectedly: that same city that was home to the World's Fair would face terror and destruction and loss on 9/11, when two incredibly stately and sturdy buildings were reduced to rubble. Hurricane Katrina would devastate New Orleans. Wildfires would destroy the town of Paradise, California. An errant ship would take down the Key Bridge in Baltimore in mere minutes.

Mother Nature presents us with floods in Vermont, tornadoes in Iowa, hurricanes in Florida, and wildfires even here in Massachusetts. Wars rage in Ukraine and Gaza and dozens of other places around the globe. And these are just a few of the many destructive events that have plagued us in recent years. I cannot imagine what it would be like to lose one's home and everything in it, to lose work and school, friends and neighbors, to have nowhere to go and nothing but the shirt on your back.

And yet.... what Jesus is reminding the disciples today he is also reminding us: these signs are not God's threat of the end times. Rather these results of human choices and natural phenomena are reminders that this life, this world is not permanent.

God's love and God's promise is.

When we place all our hope in big sturdy buildings or government programs or fail-safe engineering and all our pleasures on the promise of

technology or name-brand opulence, we are likely to experience a fall: a tumbling of markets, the high price of greed, an invasion of computer gremlins, a bursting of bubbles. That doesn't mean we should crawl into bed with the covers over our heads or build a dooms day retreat stocked with provisions. We still have a life to live here and a message of love and justice and hope to share now. It is why we are called together in Jesus' name: to love God and God's people and to make a difference in God's world.

Martin Luther is reported to have said that even if he knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, he would still plant his apple tree. Accurate quote or not, it is just what Jesus seems to be saying to the disciples and to us. We do not know what the future holds; we do not know the hour or the minute of any life ending event or the day and time of any catastrophe. What we do know is that God is in each hour and every minute and accompanies us through those catastrophes as well as the joys and the hum-drum of every day. God's plan is for a world created good and for a fallen humanity to indeed be reborn in God's grace.

And the plan is for us to be God's hands and voice and heart in this unsteady world that is often on the verge of toppling.

And so, firefighters rescue thousands in New York, volunteers stream into New Orleans, Paradise City and the Key Bridge are rebuilt. Neighbors helping neighbors, strangers becoming friends, government agencies working together with private industry.

The disciples went into the cities and towns. The fledgling church survived the Roman pogrom, the gospel came down through the ages to us. It is now our turn to look for signs, not of the end times but rather signs of God's love in the world and those who need it. It is our turn to face the

changes and challenges of modern life and extend a welcome in words that can be heard and understood. It is our turn to keep on keeping on in the face of death and destruction, false prophets and self-proclaimed saviors.

And when the changes come with challenge or controversy, with outside pressure or inside division; when they are sometimes difficult and even painful, we are reminded that this kind of struggle is like giving birth: it leads to new life...good life...eternal life.

It took several decades, legislatures, and grass roots pressure to raise funds to restore the World's Fair site. It took many discussions and designs to come to today's quiet, family friendly park. It sent me and most of my fellow graduates to places far and wide and lives that bounced up and down and around as we raised families and tried out careers as teachers and social workers, insurance agents and business men, and yes, pastors. Our best laid plans and dreams did not always shape up to be exactly what we planned. There was not a straight road among us, but a God-filled road all the same.

So, when the roof caves in - or the stock market does; when that interstate highway comes to a standstill - or our plans do; when the lights go out and the elevator breaks down - or when our hopes dim and our relationships crumble, we take a deep breath and whisper a faithful prayer.

It is not time to give in to end-of-the-world worries. Rather, it is time to keep our eyes fixed on God's kingdom: to step out in love and good faith to be the people of God wherever we are and whatever's going on. It is time to go on in the sure and certain hope that Christ is with us, leading us forward one step at a time, shaping us as promised to be children of God right here, right now, and forever.

Amen.

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