

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, November 18, 2018

26<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost

TEXTS: Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13:1-8

“Looking to the future . . .”

This past Monday, I was at our weekly gathering of pastors in Sparta. As we were getting ready to delve into what is now today’s Lectionary passages, one of my colleagues asked me what I was going to preach about on my last Sunday here at Zion. I replied immediately, “the Gospel lesson of course. ‘Do you see this great building; this beautiful sanctuary? A time will come when (witch’s voice) not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.’ (And your little dog too!)” Actually that’s not really what I’m going to preach upon; but Jesus’ words do make a great backdrop for sermon about the future and its unpredictability.

Friends, you are a part of the ages here in Long Valley. People who have shared your faith, your grace, your hopes and dreams, your sense of mission and ministry, have been a part of the landscape in this community for over 250 years! That’s more than 10 generations; longer than our nation has been a nation. Zion church has been in this very spot, this geographic location, for 186 years (if my math is correct); longer than most people can imagine.

As most of you know my good wife teaches in the Dover school system. She recently found that one of the administrators at Dover lives right here in Long Valley; across the trail on West Maple Street. His name is Mr. Taxiarchou (but everybody calls him Mr. T). Mr. T mentioned to Jenny that he loves hearing the church bell ring across valley on Sunday mornings. Friends, our church bell (or one like it – you broke the first one) has been ringing across this valley for over 150 years!

With this kind of history, with a story that reaches back well beyond the memory of our grandparents’ grandparents’ grandparents; it’s easy get a bit complacent about our church and to be lulled into believing that this church will be here for at least another 250 years and maybe longer - simply by default. It’s easy to believe that as long as we offer worship services on Sunday morning, continue in a relative sense of mission and are nice to the people who come in the door, this congregation will continue as it always has . . . forever. Now you know, and I know, and everybody with two wits to rub together should know that such a thing is simply not the case, and to entertain such thoughts of automatic and perpetual operation is truly a disservice to the generations and generations of people who came before you and all the hard work, difficult decisions and agonizing concerns they endured to keep Zion Church on map in their day and to this point.

When I look back upon the histories of many of the churches that I have served, I remember stories of things being tight enough that the pastor was paid in part in fresh produce and half a hog. I remember the story of when church officials met with the local church council to suggest closing the church doors, only to be convinced otherwise when the council members showed them the Sunday School attendance records. I

remember stories of schisms that racked a congregation and resulted in the loss of over 1/3 of the members on the church roll. Zion's history is no different. There was the decision to abandon the current house of worship (what we now know as the Old Union Church) and to build a new sanctuary. I've been told of epic floods, and of one fairly recently in your history, which brought water into church. I've heard of the episode of pastoral misconduct a few decades ago. Friends, the history of Zion Church has not always been an easy one.

Your forbearers worked themselves silly. They held onto their faith in extremely difficult situations. They forged on in faith when most reasonable people would have said, "pack it up". And to simply assume that this congregation will continue into future on its own steam is truly an insult to all that they have done over the years and decades and centuries.

I'm sure that this attitude of permanence existed among many, if not most of the people of Jerusalem and Israel in the days of Jesus, nearly all of them good Jews who were faithful to their God and observant of all the laws and rituals and sacrifices required of them during their lives. There had been a temple in Jerusalem for over 800 years! The current temple had been in place since the return of the exiles from Babylon nearly 500 years prior. The Herodian complex that Jesus and his disciples gazed upon from the Mount of Olives was in the final stages of completion after many decades of construction and was one of the architectural wonders of the world at that time. It would have been so easy for the faithful Jews of that age, even in the midst of Roman occupation, to say to themselves, "Our God, our Temple, and we ourselves will never be moved. Our religion, our beautiful city, our temple will continue forever! And yet in a matter of less than four decades, the entire city would be reduced to rubble and the Temple with it in an extremely violent suppression by Romans of a Jewish rebellion. Most likely thousands of Jews were killed and the remainder scattered across the landscape having lost everything they owned. "Not one stone" proclaimed Jesus.

Yet hidden in this prediction that is admittedly filled with gloom and doom, Jesus offered hope to his disciples, as he offers hope to us to this day, saying, "Do not be alarmed. These things must take place."

Let me pause at this point to remind you all that in first century Palestine good Jews believed that God lived in the Jerusalem Temple; that God resided in the Holy of Holies inside that Temple. Therefore it was easy to extrapolate that as long as the temple stood, God would be in the midst of the people. Now we might actually chuckle a bit at such an idea, yet I venture to guess that for many people of Zion throughout the ages, there has been and is at least a subconscious idea that as long as this building stands, God will be in the midst of this congregation and of the community of Long Valley. Well my friends let me state the obvious to you as clearly and as boldly as I can. God doesn't live here. And it makes no difference to God whether this building stands or falls, whether the beauty of this sanctuary continues or 'not one stone will be left upon another'. God doesn't need your temple, nor anyone else's. God doesn't need anything! What I

believe God desires is a relationship, with you and with millions of people like you throughout this good earth.

So what is it that your interim pastor, your “journeyman” wants to leave with you?

First, that you should know that God is with you, not because of this place, this building, but because God is with every atom of the universe. And since God is with you, you have no reason to be alarmed - at anything! The earth will change. There will be wonders that we cannot begin to imagine that will arise. There will be horrors that will make us cringe that will assail the world and most likely will assail us. Entire kingdoms will rise and fall around us. There will be crazy weather. (There will be sudden snowstorms that strand us and cause us despair.) This is not the end, for just as God shaped the beginning of all things, it is God who will shape the end of all things.

Secondly, being the church is hard work. And this congregation and the greater church of Jesus Christ will not survive if we sit around assuming that everything will continue naturally and under its own power. As I noted, to assume that everything will continue into future because everything has continued for last 250 years is an insult to those who came before you and a sure and dire prediction of your own disaster in the future. So roll up your sleeves. Make space in your busy lives and your busy calendars. Be prepared to offer this congregation all that you can possibly offer; your talents, your time, and let us not forget your financial support. Zion needs all that.

Finally, (and this has little do with today’s scripture) treat your incoming pastor well. She is a highly trained individual who has taken a leap faith to uproot her life and replant it here in Long Valley. I ask you to honor her decision by making her as welcome as you possibly can by working diligently alongside her for sake of the Gospel, by listening with open ears and minds and hearts to her suggestions for the life of the church, and by loving her as one of your own.

Please know that I am grateful for all that you have been to me over the past two years, that I will pray for you and for Pastor Ingrid, that I will miss you, AND that I will not come back to visit you as it is my duty to cut all ties so that I will not be an influence in any way upon your developing relationship with your new pastor.

May God bless you all!

Amen.