

## SERMON

+ Pentecost 26; Lectionary 33 B

November 17, 2024

When Martin Luther was a young monk  
struggling with his own spirituality and sense of righteousness,  
his superior, spiritual director, and confessor, Johann von Staupitz,  
sent him on a trip to Rome.

Luther was eager to go.  
He thought it would be a spiritual awakening.  
And it was spectacular –  
the buildings, sculptures, churches,  
and holy sites everywhere.

He did it all!  
He hit every holy site as any other tourist and pilgrim would.  
Only he did it more fervently than anyone.

But sometime during his visit,  
when he had spent a florin here  
to view a hair from the beard of John the Baptist or some other relic,  
and a guilder there to climb a flight of 28 steps on his knees  
saying the Lord's Prayer on each step,  
suddenly it hit him.

It just wasn't right.  
How were these prayers and acts of devotion  
any more effective than the prayers he prayed  
or the acts of devotion he performed  
back in his monk's cell at the monastery, he wondered.

And these holy sights were plagued with corruption.  
Having to pay for the opportunity  
to pray didn't seem right.  
And where was the money going, anyway?  
And come to think of it,  
how was it that 18 German churches  
claimed to be the burial site of one of the 12 apostles?  
It just didn't add up.

There was deception to the grandeur.

That's how it was for Jesus, too,  
when he and his disciples came to Jerusalem.  
In Mark's story, this is their first and only visit to the city.

And these disciples – fishermen and tradesmen  
from the rural and agricultural north, Galilee –  
are mightily impressed with the sites of Jerusalem  
as was Luther with Rome.  
And you would be, too.  
Jerusalem was very impressive.

The temple grounds themselves  
are located at the peak of the holy mountain,  
and are surrounded by a wall  
that stretches about a mile around.

Thirty-five acres of stone and marketplace  
and people and activity.  
And anchored at the far west end is the temple,  
over a thousand feet wide and over 1600 feet long,  
you could lay 30 football fields  
side by side and end to end in that space.

It features stones as large as this predella is wide.  
White marble stretches to the sky,  
and much of it is gilded with gold,  
making it nearly impossible to look at on a sunny day.

It is certainly impressive,  
and it's no wonder the disciples  
are bug-eyed and slack-jawed about it.  
They'd never seen anything like this before.

Neither has Jesus, in Mark's gospel.  
But he's not impressed the way his disciples are.  
He sees beyond the stones and the walls,  
like Luther did in Rome,  
and he sees a corrupt system of temple worship

and a priesthood to blame.  
He sees deception to the grandeur.

He predicts that these impressive and massive stones  
would crumble.  
That, of course, would be a cataclysmic event.

It sounded to the disciples  
like something they had heard from other preachers:  
doomsday preachers  
who claimed to know, and predicted, the end times –  
the day of the Lord –  
when all would be judged and fulfilled.  
When will this be, the disciples wonder?

And Jesus recounts for them  
the things he knows  
those prophets of the last day had proclaimed.

Wars and rumors of wars,  
earthquakes and famines:  
these are the things  
the prophets of doom had proclaimed  
would be the signs of the day of the Lord.

But these impressive proclamations  
are like the stones of the temple.  
There is deception to the grandeur.

The truth is, these “signs” are the events of every age.  
There has never been a generation  
that has not known war or natural disasters.

These things are just going to continue to happen, says Jesus.  
The end is still to come, he says.  
These are just the beginning of the birth pangs.

Be careful who you listen to, Jesus says,  
because the grandeur of someone’s proclamation  
doesn’t mean it’s God’s word they’re proclaiming.

There may be deception to the grandeur.

Ironically, of course,  
Jesus knows that the new age is indeed about to begin,  
and it will begin here in Jerusalem,  
but it will not be because of impressive temple stones  
or societal or cosmic disasters.

The new age will indeed begin  
with something very impressive,  
but in a completely different way.

Within the week,  
Jesus himself will usher in the new age,  
when the temple of his own body is destroyed  
and then rebuilt in three days.

That's why he has come to Jerusalem.  
Not to gawk at the stones of the temple,  
and not even to prophecy the destruction of those stones,  
but to give himself to destruction,  
so that the temple of his body  
can be rebuilt in three days,  
and the new age can begin.

It's about those birth pangs, really.  
There's a lot of pain and suffering in the process of birth.  
And every age has its share of pain and suffering.  
We do, too.

But in the end, beyond the birth pangs,  
she gives birth.  
There is new life – a new creation – and joy.

And that is the point.  
In everyday life, this 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark  
is about the hope that lies beyond the suffering,  
the joy that follows sorrow;  
and the life that follows death.

And to be clear,  
that's not just a promise for the future to look forward to.  
This is about that hope, joy, and life  
for our life here and now.

The Day of the Lord will come,  
and hope, joy, and life will be brought to completion –  
the promise fulfilled.

But even now,  
Christ has already died and been raised  
to usher in that new age.  
We have already been baptized into his death  
and filled with God's own Spirit of life.  
We have already been adopted as a child of God  
and made heir of the resurrection life God gives us.

We are set free from the bondage to sin and death  
to live life in the resurrection of Jesus now,  
not just as a heavenly promise in the days to come.  
We also live now in God's hope, joy, and life.

That is the word of God to us,  
and the promise of God to us,  
and the gift of God to us.

Even in the midst of destruction, suffering,  
disaster, and birth pangs,  
we live in the hope, joy, and life of God.  
Today and always.