

THE "REAL" JESUS WARNED ABOUT...
LUKE 21:5-7, 20-28
(THIRD SERMON IN SERIES)

FEBRUARY 16, 1986

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent, the forty-day period leading up to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Our theme this year is "Looking to Jesus," from Hebrews 12:2, "Looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." In this series of sermons, we are also looking for Jesus, trying to obtain a clearer, more accurate picture of the person Jesus who walked on this earth, trying to see behind the Jesus of the church's theology to the "real" Jesus.

Last Sunday I made the point that Jesus aligned himself with John the Baptist, rather than with the other groups and movements of that day, such as the Zealots, Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes. Some of you astute scholars asked about the Essenes. Wasn't Jesus trained by the Essenes? There is some speculation that Jesus did have contact with the Essenes. Some wonder if Jesus did not spend time with them prior to his baptism and the beginning of his ministry. The point I was trying to make last Sunday is this: even if Jesus studied with the Essenes, he did not align himself with the Essenes when he began his ministry. His life style and message differed greatly from that of the Essenes who were ascetics, separated themselves from society and lived in the desert, and believed in the violent overthrow of the Romans "when the time was right." Jesus also differed from John the Baptist, but he began his ministry by accepting John's baptism which was a strong statement by Jesus on the intent of his mission.

John the Baptist came preaching and prophesying (which, in the biblical sense, means "warning") that God would soon come to judge and punish the entire nation. Jesus also warned the people. I read some of his words to you from the Gospel lesson this morning. Jesus warned about...what? Ordinarily in the bulletin, the name of the preacher of the morning appears on the same line with the title of the sermon. I had my name placed beneath the title this morning, but I imagine some of you clever ones will still read the title as, "Jesus warned about...Douglas Norris!"

Generally, liberal Christians of this century have ignored these words of warning and the other passages in the New Testament that seem to speak of the cataclysmic end of the world. They feel that these passages reflect the apocalyptic theology of that day, rather than Jesus. The apocalyptic writings generally teach that catastrophes will precede the coming of the Son of Man who will rescue the faithful. Somewhere in the time line (and they differ among themselves) there is a battle fought between the armies of God and the armies of Satan at Armageddon, which is the site of the ancient city of Megiddo, located near present-day Haifa. Megiddo, or Armageddon, is in a strategic spot from which can be seen the entire Valley of Jezreel. King Solomon turned Megiddo into a chariot city and located his famous stables there.

The mainline denominations of the twentieth century have generally ignored these warning statements of Jesus. These words have made us uncomfortable and so have been called apocalyptic and of lesser truth than the other sayings of Jesus. Liberal Christianity generally has believed that if

the teachings of Jesus were obeyed---if the morals and values of Jesus were practiced---the kingdom of God would come. They see Jesus as a relatively simple person with an ethical message. As I said in the first sermon in this series, it was Albert Schweitzer in 1907 who shocked the biblical scholars by his insistence that these uncomfortable words of Jesus were indeed central to his message and could not be ignored. The controversy still continues.

At the other end of the theological spectrum are the conservative and fundamentalist Christians who generally apply the warnings of Jesus and the apocalyptic passages of the gospels and the rest of the New Testament to the future. In other words, the conservatives teach that Jesus was prophesying about events that are still yet to come, even though Jesus clearly stated in Mark 13:30, for example, "Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place."

What did Jesus mean? Let's go to history and see what was happening at that time. Last week I sketched the Roman occupation and the resistance of the Zealots. The Zealots especially resented taxation, believing that God was their only Lord, that the land and its resources belonged to God, and that the paying of taxes to Caesar was a sign of unfaithfulness to God. The Zealots led an open rebellion after Pontius Pilate was appointed governor of Judea and Samaria. This was quickly squelched by the Romans, and 2,000 rebels were crucified. By the time Jesus began his ministry, the tension was high. The Zealots engaged in terrorist activities to harass the Romans.

In 66 A.D., about thirty years after Jesus lived, the Zealots launched an opposition movement that actually overthrew the Romans. The Zealots took over the government of the country and ruled for four years. Then a powerful army arrived from Rome, led by Titus. In 70 A.D., Titus regained Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. The last group of Zealots held out against the Romans at the mountain fortress of Masada until 73 A.D. when nearly a thousand of them chose to commit suicide rather than surrender to Rome. In 135 A.D., the Romans completed the tragedy. They leveled Jerusalem, banished the Jews, and vowed that no Jew would ever again live in Jerusalem.

When we understand the history of the times, then the warnings of Jesus about the destruction of the temple, with the prophecy that the present generation would witness it, take on a new meaning. Jesus was a real person who lived in history. His head was not in the clouds, dreaming about some future time that you and I have not yet seen. Jesus was very concerned about his nation, his people, the holy city of Jerusalem, and the beloved temple. The temple was the center of Jewish life. "O how lovely is thy dwelling place," sang the psalmists. The temple was loved and soon it would be destroyed, Jesus warned.

In all my years of schooling, I was never told about the destruction of the temple. Or, I should say, none of my professors or the authors I remember gave it much significance in the quest of the historical Jesus, or in understanding Jesus' message. It is only in recent times that some of the scholars have begun to interpret the gospels and Jesus' mission and message against the backdrop of the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. and the eventual annihilation of the nation in 135 A.D.

When Jesus lived, tension was in the air, war with the Romans was brewing, people were angry and frightened. Albert Nolan (to whom I am much

indebted for these sermons), in his book Jesus Before Christianity, says that the questions of the times were: "Would Israel defeat the Romans? Would the Messiah come? Was the world about to come to an end?" (Pg. 86)

John the Baptist, in contrast to the other voices of the day, preached that the destruction of the entire nation was imminent. Jesus issued the same warning. The difference between the two--between John the Baptist and Jesus--was that John prophesied the judgment of God but Jesus prophesied the salvation of God. As Nolan says, "John's mood is like the mournful tune of a funeral dirge; Jesus' mood is like the joyful tune of a wedding dance. John's behaviour was characterised by fasting; Jesus' behaviour was characterised by feasting." (pg. 77)

Jesus looked upon the chain of events that was leading the nation to an unprecedented catastrophe as an opportunity for the kingdom of God to come. His message (Mark 1:15) was "The time is right, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel." The time is right. A catastrophe is coming. The foundations are shaking. Complacency, indifference, and ignorance are crumbling. Wake up. Shape up. Look at what is happening. Let these events draw you closer to God. Let the kingdom come, rather than the catastrophe. Turn from that which is causing these disasters and turn to God. Repent, believe, and good will triumph!

Consequently, Jesus came with a sense of urgency. He was not a simple teacher gathering pupils to hear lectures about morality and values. He was a prophet in the biblical sense, preaching, warning the people and calling them to repentance and faith. As Jesus ministered and the opposition became more intense, he realized the nation was not receiving his message. As he reflected on the inevitable disaster, he lamented (Luke 21:23), "Alas for those who are pregnant, alas for those who have nursing infants." When he came near to Jerusalem, he wept and cried (Luke 19:42-44):

If you only knew today what is needed for peace! But now you cannot see it! The time will come when your enemies will surround you with barricades, blockade you, and close in on you from every side. They will completely destroy you and the people within your walls; not a single stone will they leave in its place, because you did not recognize the time when God came to save you!

Earlier Jesus had lamented (Luke 13:34):

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!

The people had a choice. God was acting in their history. God was giving them a chance, but they blew it! They ignored Jesus. Even more than ignore, they crucified Jesus. They tried to silence the voice who warned them of destruction. They preferred to listen to easier words. They preferred to listen to those who told them they were among the faithful and, because they kept the law, would be saved. They preferred to listen to the voices of violence, to those who promised a military victory. They preferred militarism to repentance. They preferred to shut their eyes and shut their ears to any

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idea of catastrophe. They wanted to be cuddled and comforted. Jesus gave them hope. Jesus gave them a way out. They preferred the status quo and security. They preferred easy answers, or, rather, they preferred no questions being asked. Just like today!

Jesus came with a sense of urgency. That is why the "real" Jesus is so relevant to us today, for the times in which we live are similar. For we, too, are faced with the possibility of unprecedented catastrophe. The choice Jesus gave the people of his day is our choice as well. "The time is right. The kingdom of God is near."

We are living in a time when not only the temple might be destroyed, when not only a city might be destroyed, when not only a nation might be destroyed; but when the earth itself might be destroyed. We are living in a time when the weapons we have devised might very well terminate humankind from the face of this earth. We are living in a time when values are changing, when immorality is rampant, when pornography, crime and violence are almost out of control. We are living in a time when the poor are getting poorer and, according to Jesus, this angers God. We are living in a time when the future generations are being raped, a time when our generation is robbing our children of their resources.

There is a sense of urgency. Jesus' message is extremely relevant. What did Jesus mean by repentance? What did Jesus mean by the kingdom of God? These will be subjects of the next two sermons in this series. The choice Jesus gave is our choice. Will we choose the kingdom of God, or will our generation, to its peril, also ignore Jesus? What is your choice?