

## Wesley United Methodist Church

November 17, 2019

“Watch Out...”

Luke 21:5-19, Isaiah 65:17-25

And he said, ‘Watch out that you are not deceived; for many will come in my name and say, “I am he!” and, “The time is near!” Do not follow them... Wars and revolutions, nation against nation, kingdom against kingdom, earthquakes, famines, pestilence...betrayal, hatred...’ This is the heart of our gospel reading today. For those of us who live comfortable lives, it can be easy to dismiss these readings with its predictions of persecutions, earthquakes, and famines. How could those apply to our lives? For those of us who live comfortable lives in Christian countries, we do not know what it is to be persecuted for our faith. Well, maybe not quite yet... And if we live comfortably, we likely have never really been hungry, so we cannot even begin to imagine what it is like to go for a long period of time without enough to eat. Depending on where we live, an earthquake might be a real possibility, but we likely live in well-designed homes in a community with an early warning system. So, earthquake may not mean the same thing for us as it did for our ancestors.

This seems a text designed for its original hearers. It seems designed for early Christians for whom the end of the world and the return of Christ seemed imminent. Those who did not have scientific or economic explanations for famines and earthquakes. Those who lived in a world where choosing to follow Jesus and acknowledge him as the Messiah, as the Son of God, was to take your life into your hands—quite literally. For thousands in the early years of the church, being a Christian meant persecution and frequently death. So, how could this gospel text about the end times and the likelihood of persecution be relevant to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

I want to return to Jesus’ command: ‘Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, “I am he!” and, “The time is near!” Do not go after them. Watch out that you are not led astray. There is a message to which we 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians can relate. While we may not face the same immediate life and death situations as so many of our forebearers in the faith did, we do face considerable temptations. We are, in fact, in great danger of being led astray.

We all know that temptations in this world are great. Many of us may be confronted by those who demean our faith and point out all that is wrong with institutional religion. They often seem content in their beliefs and contempt us to think our lives would be easier if we just gave up on this whole following Jesus thing.

Every day we are bombarded by advertisements that tell us that if only we drank this coffee or drove this car or banked at this bank our lives would be the picture of fulfillment. We are surrounded by clever and creative enticements to buy more, to buy into the idea that material goods can give our lives meaning and make us feel fulfilled. And it is all too tempting to give in to our own selfish desires. When we are wronged, it is tempting to give into a desire for revenge and vengeance. When we are angry, it is tempting to lash out in anger and to hurt those we love. It is tempting to give in to our own laziness—to stay in bed instead of going to church, to give more to those in need, to resolve to be a more active member of our community, and the like, next year or when it is more convenient for us.

That is not who Jesus asks us to be. That is not the life he calls us to do. He does not call us to laziness, material cravings, or to a faith that cherry picks the simple and fun parts. No, Jesus calls us to be his followers, to be Christians. Jesus calls us to engage deeply with our faith and to be committed. We are called to be committed to living lives of faithful discipleship. This does not mean that our lives will be easy. There have been and no doubt will be times when we want to give in to temptation. When we want to seek immediate gratification or the path that seems easier, but we would be wrong to do so.

This is not just a matter of blindly following a leader because he asked us to follow. The path of being a Christian may be challenging at times, and it may not always seem like the easy road, but it is a path worth following for our reward is great. I know what you may be thinking—not this “your reward in heaven” stuff again. The church has tried that before and it didn’t go well. Well, don’t worry, I am not implying that we should spend our earthly lives suffering so we can seek a reward in heaven. I firmly believe there are rewards for our faith lives right here and now.

Being a follower of Jesus satisfies a hunger and a desire in my soul—a desire for meaning and acceptance. Being a follower of Jesus means that I am not alone in this. Even on the bad days when I feel unworthy or as though I am carrying the weight of the world, I am not alone. God is with me and even when I feel uncertain about the future or my place in it, I know that it is not all about me. I can trust that I am a part of something much bigger than me. I can trust that in some small way, I do matter. I am a beloved child of God, and in some way my being present—each of us being present on this earth matters. We are a part of something big. We are a part of building the kingdom of God, a part of making the world a better place.

While the personal, spiritual reward of following Jesus is significant, I believe it also matters because following Jesus inspires us to be our best and do our best in the world. Following Jesus inspires us to be better people, to pay attention to the needs of those around us, to do our part to make this broken, sinful world a bit more like the kingdom of God.

And let us hold fast on the promises of the Lord through his servant Isaiah where he has in mind a whole new earth in which people will not toil in vain for others. He is promising a truly free people. He is promising peace and unity. God says that we will be a people blessed by the Lord.