

Luke 21:5-19

"Salvation"

by Vicar Albert Romkema

Introduction

I was thinking the other day about some of the sermons I have preached since I began my internship here at Zion. They are some of the really central topics of our faith. I have preached on grace, faith, and forgiveness; on communion, prayer, healing, discipleship, and mission. I have preached during Lent, Advent, and through much of the Pentecost season. It has been quite a journey.

As I was considering what to preach on this Sunday, I realized that this text directs us towards the message of salvation, another central aspect of our Christian faith. It speaks about signs of the end of times, about Jesus seemingly predicting the destruction of the temple and about his own resurrection and return.

I think it is a good topic to discuss, the salvation narrative, although I remember a retired pastor friend of mine saying that he does not think about this topic all that much. Mostly he just waits like a young boy after dinner, anticipating the dessert that will follow. It is true; one does not catch a butterfly by chasing after it. It is best to simply wait quietly until it comes and lands on your shoulder.

Our lives are not all about our chasing after heaven, looking for some distant payoff. If we think in those terms we may miss the point of living out our mission in the present tense, right here today.

But I also know that there are those who wonder about the salvation message – what is it exactly? What is the Kingdom? Is it something we have to wait for, or is it something that we enjoy right now, or is it both? If it is now, then why is there so much suffering in the world? I think perhaps it may be useful that we have a discussion about this topic. What is salvation and how do we participate in its arrival?

But let's set the scene first and then go a little deeper into the salvation message of God's grace.

Body of the text*Our purpose in Jesus' mission*

In our Gospel Jesus and his disciples have finally arrived in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Remember all those weeks ago when we heard that Jesus had *turned his face toward Jerusalem*, and then, week after week, we went deeper in our reflections of how to live the Christian life as Jesus moved closer and closer to Jerusalem? Well, Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem and is now in the temple; his final days are approaching as is our church year ending, Advent begins in a couple of weeks.

A few chapters earlier in Luke, we discover what Jesus thinks about people selling their wares in the temple; "My house will be a house of prayer," he says, "but you have made it into a den of robbers." (Luke 19:46) Throughout Jesus' ministry he condemns people who exploit the poor and the needy; in fact that was Jesus' mission which he himself announced - to proclaim "good news to the poor, release of the captives, freedom for the oppressed, and to help the blind see." (Luke 4:16-21) This description includes each of us in some form or another.

This was Jesus' mission while on earth in person. It was an inclusive and expanding message of hope for those in need. It is the message that the disciples were asked to take up, and all Christians. Jesus asks each person, each community, and each church to find their purpose in this mission.

That is why we do some of the things we do at Zion – that is why we host the friendship meal, and that is why we make quilts and prayer shawls, that is why we donate to the Eastern Synod and to the ELCIC. We do it to express our purpose within God's mission – much of which happens outside the church walls.

But I also think it is important to realize that this is an ongoing conversation that we need to have as a community; discovering ever more deeply who we are and why we are here. That is why we worship together, preach the gospel, have bible studies, and confirmation class. We do so to share our stories, to support one another, to pray together, to celebrate God's presence among us, and to discern our future and our purpose as a church. Who are we and why are we here? These are important questions to continue asking ourselves going forward.

Not one stone will be left on another

Today in our Gospel, Jesus is still in the temple when some of his disciples look around and comment on how wonderfully adorned the temple is, with beautiful stones and with many gifts dedicated to God. Indeed, the temple must have seemed incredibly impressive. It had been the subject of enlargement and renovation since about 20 BC under the rule of Herod the Great and continued for the better part of 100 years (and you think the kitchen renovation is taking long). Almost 100 years of renovation and construction; it must have been an amazing structure!

But for Jesus it was something that would not last, it was something which had little value beside his mission. He wanted his disciples and those gathered (and us) to know just how unimportant the stones of the temple had become.

"The *days will come* when not one stone will be left on another; all will be thrown down," Jesus says (v. 6), using *end of time* language.

We are God's temple

Although the temple was destroyed (within 40 years of Jesus saying this), Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple is about more than just the temple. Jesus sets in motion here the New Testament church's emerging understanding of the temple; that the temple could be destroyed, and "in three days I will raise it up," he says (in John 2:9). Jesus suggests that the new temple would be the resurrected body of Jesus himself.

Jesus wanted Christians to know that the Body of Christ did not just displace the temple or make it obsolete; the Body of Christ *is* the temple.

As I was reflecting on Jesus' words, it occurred to me that most of us know something about temples crumbling. My parents just recently moved out of the home they have lived in for 45 years. They downsized from their home with a beautifully manicured garden (which my father worked non-stop in) and a two-car garage into a rented condo. What a change this has been. When we drive by the old

home now it seems like a different place – the garden is not well maintained, the lawn is not cut regularly, and there are strange cars in the driveway.

Is this a temple? Well no, at least not in the way Jesus speaks, but it is a place that seemed a permanent fixture of our family for a generation – it was the place our family congregated at, ate Thanksgiving and Christmas meals in. It seemed solid and immovable.

I think all of us have experienced the ache of seeing something that we thought would always be there being taken away, removed. And the things that last are not always the things we think will last. It can really tear at our hearts when the seemingly immovable is taken away. I think that the disciples felt this way as well, after Jesus suggested the temple may crumble.

But Jesus' message is not just for his disciples and it is not just about the temple. Jesus follows with an end-of-times narrative and ultimately about salvation and preparation for Jesus' return.

Salvation: already-not yet

Salvation is an eternal event that is described in various tenses in the New Testament. We *have been saved* (Eph. 2:8); we *are being saved* (1 Cor. 1:18); and we *shall be saved* (Rom. 5:9). Salvation has not happened as much as it is happening; it touches all of time simultaneously. And we are drawn into its promises through our baptism.

So when Jesus says in our text today, "the days will come," he draws us into thoughts about the *not yet* aspect of salvation as it is sometimes referred to – it has not arrived yet, future tense. This is when Jesus will return to finish things off that are already begun; to make all things new. And we do not really know what this will look like when Jesus does return, as Jesus speaks in metaphor when referring to the kingdom. He says "the kingdom is like..." or "it may be compared to..." (see Matthew 13), and then used stories, parables, and metaphors so that we could recognize what was obvious to Jesus but not so obvious to us.

Although perhaps the *new heavens and new earth* description of the Isaiah 65 reading for today gives us some insight. Or have a look at Revelation 21 where God himself walks with his people and wipes the tears from our eyes (21:4) – there will be no more crying, no more pain, and there does not even need to be a sun or moon as the glory of God himself is among us (21:22-23). Talk about anticipating dessert after dinner!

What we trust in faith, though, is that God will do something unexpected by grace. And regarding the difficult times that may arrive, leading up to this, Jesus simply says, "Do not be afraid," (v.9), "stand firm" in Christ (v. 19). This is faith; a gift from God to wait for the butterfly to land on our shoulder.

But there is also salvation that is in the present; the *already* aspect of the salvation message – it is here right now. These are the glimpses we get in our lives today of the coming Kingdom, of the sacred that surrounds us even now. Like what watching a sunrise or a sunset can do to us, or the *super moon* which will occur this evening (where the moon will appear the biggest it has been since 1948); or what we feel when we see children playing, being children; or how when we grieve the loss of a loved one we may at the same time

realize that somehow something deeper is moving alongside our grief. In these moments, the bottomless depth of God reintroduces himself to us in the concrete immediacy of the events of our lives.

Our call as Christians

And we, as Christians, are called into activities which make these events more widely available. So here we are, back to our purpose in God's mission. We are involved in this. In the giving and receiving of our lives to each other, Christ is in our midst already, returned, and working out his mission through us by the Holy Spirit...even as we wait for his return in grace. That is why it is called *already-not yet*.

A few weeks ago I was visiting a very sick member of Zion. After we sat for a while she said, "You know Albert, I have a lot of friends, more than I thought I had. So many people from Zion have come to visit me since I have been here," – this was such a wonderful thing to hear. That is part of the *already* aspect of salvation. That is Christ in our presence in the here and now, providing glimpses of salvation through our activities with each other.

Union with God is hidden in these precious depths of our ordinariness – our daily activities of love and service to others and ourselves.

When we are open to others, when we live with a readiness and a willingness to stay in relationship with each other, this is salvation right now. It is not about replacing our human nature with something more fully divine, but of growing into an understanding of who we are as broken yet beloved children of the living God, and living out this understanding with each other. It is about being free to let God give through us.

As long as we show up with some degree of vulnerability, the Spirit can keep working. Self-sufficiency makes God experience impossible (adapted from the work of Richard Rohr). I think this is very important to remember - *as long as we show up with some degree of vulnerability, the Spirit can keep working*. Just look at how Jesus entered the world – as a baby and utterly vulnerable. This kind of naked vulnerability means that I am willing to let you influence me, to change me. In such openness there is heaven right here and right now.

Conclusion

Our God is a living God who lovingly interacts with us in our daily lives. God pursues us in our restlessness, holds us in our brokenness, and receives us exactly where we are in our lives – in grief and sorrow, and also in joy and celebration. He did so, is doing so, and will continue to do so with our parents and with our parent's parents; he did so, is doing so, and will continue to do so for our children and our children's children; and he did so, is doing so, and will continue to do so for each of us.

The salvation message is one which comes with a promise from God that he will never leave us, from everlasting to everlasting; we are held in the palm of his hand.

And we are invited and entrusted with a sacred task - to make the glimpses of God's presence more widely available through our activities with each other and with others.

So even if our "temples" fall we may live deeply and fully in the knowledge that God has saved, is saving, and will save his children.

What joy this is, we are redeemed! Amen