

“An Opportunity for...WHAT?”

Luke 21:5-28

November 17, 2019

23rd Sunday After Pentecost

Opportunities are supposed to be good and positive things that come about in good and positive situations. For example, you may have an opportunity to take on a better job when a situation arises whereby a company offers you double your salary. You may have an opportunity to get some rest from a nap when the situation arises whereby you have a comfortable recliner and a quiet empty house. A good benefit plus a good situation equals an opportunity.

Our text for today about Jesus' prophecy destruction of the temple, the tearing down of Jerusalem, and, in a broader sense, the destruction of the world. There doesn't seem to be room for any opportunities, except as Jesus says, to flee for your lives. However, in the midst of his message about the world falling apart around us, Jesus says there is an opportunity in this horrific time. He says, "This will be your opportunity to bear witness." An opportunity for.....WHAT?

Although pastors preach and church members speak a lot about witnessing to other people about God's love in Jesus Christ and how important this is, we must admit, both pastor and people, that witnessing is not something we normally like to do. In fact, we find it to be very difficult to talk to others about Christ. And why? The simple answer is sin.

Our sinful nature has tempted us into believing that other things are more important than Jesus Christ and the forgiveness, life, and salvation which He came to give. Most people are very glad to talk to other people about what is important in their lives: sports, children/grandchildren, work, and so on, often without being asked to do so. The problem is not the activity of talking. The problem is that the topic is just not important enough for us to talk about it.

Some people will then say, "It's not that Jesus is unimportant. I'm just afraid to bring Him up." Our sinful nature has convinced us to have that fear. Although we say that our relationship with Jesus Christ is the most important thing we have, we are often afraid to bring it up to people and talk with them about it. The problem is not fear. We are not afraid to talk about our favorite sports team with virtual strangers. The problem is that we are afraid of talking about Christ.

Then people will say, "It's neither of those two things. I can't witness because I don't know the Bible well enough. I am unable to present the Gospel and I cannot answer all of the objections about biblical matters." But I think we know well what is important to us. We will know that which is important to us.

For example, I listen to sports radio and am continually amazed at the sports information known by faithful fans. I have heard people who can tell you the stats on their favorite football player down to how many yards he gains on each attempt when playing in a game where the temperatures 40° or less in a stadium west of the Mississippi River where the opposing team has an animal for a mascot and he is wearing an odd numbered jersey that has either red or blue as its color. How do they know this stuff? It's because they read the literature, listen to the radio shows, and commit all of this to memory.

Our sinful nature makes us believe that we cannot speak to others about faith because we don't know enough. Then it leads us away from where we can actually learn it – the Word of God. God has revealed to us in His Word all that which He wishes us to witness. The problem is not lack of information or knowledge. The problem is our unwillingness to obtain it by reading, hearing, or studying the Word of God. Our sinful nature tempts us to stop studying the Word of God after confirmation and to receive only small portions of it one day a week. Far too often, we give into this temptation.

In addition to witnessing being a difficult activity made worse by our sin, the situation in which we are today makes it seem less of an opportunity, too. Even with the strongest of faiths and the firmest of results, witnessing is not easy. Many of the people in the world today are not Christian. So, the opposition to witnessing is growing.

The source of our message is being attacked. The Bible is less known, less respected, and less accepted as an authority as people construct their own truth and own religion.

Reaction to witnessing has changed. Now, instead of being respectful while disagreeing with the message, many people have become brutally hostile and actively oppose the message and the person of Jesus Christ. As our text for today warns us, the situation is only going to get worse. So, how can this be an opportunity to witness?

In our text for today, Jesus and His disciples are at the temple. Now, the Temple was a great source of pride for the Jews. It was the largest Temple of any kind in the civilized world. King Herod the Great (who was called "great" because of his skill at building) had built it in order to impress Rome and gain favor with his subjects. In addition to this, the temple symbolized the presence of God among His people.

On that day, some people were commenting on how beautiful it was and how nobly adorned it was. Jesus stuns them by saying that the days will come when it will be so utterly destroyed that there will not be left one stone upon the other. Naturally, the people want to know when this will be and what the sign will be of its coming. Jesus' sermon talks about the fall of the temple and the destruction of Jerusalem, while merging into the coming of a Day of Judgment and the destruction of the world. The two stories overlap each other with the former being a foreshadowing of the latter. Some of the signs are pertinent only to the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem while other signs are pertinent only to the fall of the end of the world. Many are common to both.

There will be a variety of signs before the destruction of the temple. There will be theological signs: false prophets claiming to be Christ, hatred and persecution of Christians, and even death. There will be political signs: wars and tumults; nation rising against nation; and kingdom against kingdom. There will be natural disasters: greater earthquakes, famines, pestilences, and terrors. There will be signs in the heaven among the sun, moon, and stars.

This will be a time of great suffering. Jerusalem will be surrounded by armies. It will be so bad that those who are in Judea should flee to the mountains. Those who are in the city should leave and those who are not in the city should not enter. It will be terrible for those who are pregnant or are nursing. People will die by the sword as

great distress and the wrath of God strikes the people. After the temple is destroyed, Jerusalem will be trampled under feet by the Gentiles.

The same thing, only worse, will come at the end of the world. The same signs will show themselves. False teaching, hatred & persecution of faithful Christians, chaos among the nations, and so on. People will faint with fear and foreboding of what is going to come. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the Son of Man will come in the clouds with power and great glory.

This whole scenario seems horrific (and it is). How could this possibly be an opportunity to witness? If witnessing is not on our mind and on our lips now, how will it be then? First of all, as bad as it will be, the situation is not as dire as it appears for Christians. Rather than face the future with fear, we wait for this day with trust and confidence. Jesus has prepared you and me for His Second Coming by virtue of his First Coming.

As God poured out His wrath against His people by abandoning His temple and destroying the Holy City, He will do the same thing to a greater degree on the Last Day. However, we have the forgiveness for all of our sins because of Jesus' death on the cross. Therefore, we know how we stand before God when this horrific time of judgment comes.

Secondly, with death surrounding us even more so than than it does now, we face it without fear. We have the assurance of life after the grave which goes on to eternity because of Jesus' own resurrection from the dead and His promise, "Because I live, you will live too." Therefore, in the midst of the suffering and death of the final judgment, we know that we will live past that sorrow and pain into everlasting life with only joy and peace.

Therefore, this will be an excellent opportunity to witness because of the great need and fear which will grip all people. Even though we suffer often on this earth, it is sometimes possible to overlook it and press on without needing the comfort of God's love and the power of God's strength. However, in the final days, the fear shall be so great, the suffering so intense, and the events so overwhelming, that it will not be possible to overlook and press on.

That is why this becomes a great opportunity. People will be more open to hear the message of the Gospel than they have ever been. As the crucifixion of Jesus was His witness to God's love for the sinner and judgment against sin, so the persecution of Christians and our response to it will be our witness to the same. Regardless of all our excuses for not witnessing, not being able to witness, being afraid to witness, and not knowing how to witness, Jesus tells us not to worry about them. He says "Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer." Why? Jesus goes on, "For I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict."

Not only does Jesus call us to be witnesses, but He gives us the message to speak. Jesus' words here are directed specifically to His disciples at the time of the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, but they still apply to us. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the words of Jesus came to the disciples at that time and they were able to witness without fear, even though it meant death for most of them. By the working of the same Holy

Spirit, the words of the apostles have come to us as they are recorded in the Holy Bible. And these words from the Holy Bible have come from us to those around us. They will bring comfort to those who feel the guilt of their sin by delivering forgiveness for their sins; peace to those troubled by the signs of the end times by bringing the promises of God's love, care, and support; hope to those who worry about the future as things continue to get worse by providing assurance of everlasting life in heaven.

How can we face such a great and awesome time? First, Jesus tells His disciples to be prepared to face what is to come. There is no sugar coating here. These terrible things will actually happen and we will suffer along with the rest of the world. Don't be surprised when this happens. And don't be surprised at the reaction you get from the world. The world that hated Jesus will hate His disciples.

Second, do not be deceived nor let all of this hardship and suffering that is to come drive us to despair or unbelief. He will not abandon us, but will give us wisdom to witness for Him when the hour comes and preserve us in the midst of all suffering.

Third, let His Word dwell in you richly now so that you might be prepared when the Lord puts His words in your mouth to witness to the coming judgment for those living in sin and opposing God and God's unlimited mercy for those wracked with guilt and plagued by fear. By having that Word living and active within us now, we will not be deceived then by false teaching or false prophets. We will not despair when the hatred, persecution, and rejection comes. We will not fear as things become worse and worse.

Finally, remember the final word of encouragement from Jesus when things are at their worst. He says, "Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Rather than seeing the signs of the end times as increasing our suffering, we can look on it as something which decreases the time until our redemption arrives and we are with the Lord forever in heaven.

The end of the world, as described in Holy Scripture, does not seem to be an opportunity for anything. It doesn't seem to be anything good and, according especially to our text for today, doesn't seem to be a good environment for anything good to happen. Yet the Word of God indicates that, during the end times, there will be an excellent opportunity for us to witness with the message Christ gives us and the opportunity He presents to us. So be aware, not ignorant. Be prepared, but not afraid. Be ready, but not inactive. Take hold of the opportunity which the Lord places before you to witness to the sin which brings forth this wrath and judgment and to the grace of God in Jesus Christ which brings forth forgiveness and everlasting life. That will be the greatest opportunity you ever had. Amen.