33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Cycle C, 11.17.19
Malachi 3:19-20; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-12; Luke 21:5-19
THE CHOICE IS OURS – TODAY AND EACH DAY

According to a 1st century historian named Josephus, the Jerusalem temple of Jesus’s day was an awe-inspiring wonder. Newly reconstructed by Herod the Great, the temple’s retaining walls were composed of stones forty feet long. The temple occupied a platform twice as large as the Roman Forum and four times as large as the Acropolis in Athens. Herod reportedly used so much gold to cover the outside walls that anyone who gazed at them in bright sunlight risked being blinded.

No wonder the followers of Jesus were so dazzled by the temple’s beauty. And no wonder Jesus’ suggestion that this temple would be destroyed, stone upon stone, brought such fear and terror to their hearts: Teacher, when will this happen? We had a glimpse of such terror a few weeks ago on that Sunday when the winds blew strong: two large trees on our hillside behind the Community Center were knocked over, even as some people leaving the 11:30 Mass saw it happen. Shortly after that I heard fire truck sirens rushing to the site in Lafayette where the Lafayette Tennis Club building was a "total loss" and a home's roof damaged. Two fires broke out on either side of Highway 24 that afternoon, and a KGO reporter shared a video on Twitter showing embers landing on the BART tracks that run down the middle of Highway 24.

On an even sadder note this week parishioners experienced the upheaval of their world as they faced the untimely and unexpected death of loved ones – a parishioner whose forty-eight year old brother died of a heart attack; and three little girls, ages twelve and under, and their Dad lost their Mom following complications from heart surgery. This young Mom was beloved by her family and many members of our parish and greater community. Their world has felt upheaval and the uncertainty of the future.

As people of faith, we can all say: “The future is so unpredictable.” Time and again in the gospels, Jesus cautioned his followers about getting too caught up with the future and the notion of the end of the world. In today’s gospel we hear it again: Don’t let yourself be deceived by others... disasters are always happening. That doesn’t mean the world is coming to an end. You and I know how easy it is to let ourselves get all upset about something someone said to us, about a situation that goes wrong at school or at work, about a family fight or a quarrel with a friend. When those things happen it does feel like our world is at an end. We lose sleep, we toss
things over and over in our mind, our stomach gets upset and it feels like our world is crashing down around us. Those are the times we need to hear Jesus’ words loud and clear: Disasters will always happen. They don’t mean the world is coming to an end. So don’t worry about the future.

On the other hand, Jesus didn’t ignore the future completely either. He gives his assurance that, if we’re going to be his followers, we can expect certain things to happen to us some time in the future. He warned that some of us could be arrested and put in jail for following him. (Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. sat in jail cells many times because of his Christian belief that all people -- white, black, rich, poor, men, women -- are equal in the eyes of God. Fr. Bill O’Donnell, a beloved priest from Oakland who died several years ago, was arrested many times in the Bay area when he marched in peaceful protest against nuclear weapons or picketed grocery stores to defend the right to a living wage for migrant workers who pick the crops and harvest our food.)

Jesus predicted that being his follower could cause tension with parents, brothers or sisters and friends. (How many parents, because of their Christian belief that worshipping God is a vital part of being a Catholic, always have a fight on their hands when they insist that their children come to church on Sunday? How many teenagers, because they are followers of Jesus, find themselves losing someone they thought was a friend because they won’t go along with doing drugs or picking on another student at school or go to a party where they know alcohol is being served illegally?)

In fact, if being a follower of Jesus doesn’t put a crimp in our life style, doesn’t get you and me in trouble with the institution, doesn’t create some kind of tension between us and the world around us, then we have to ask: are we really following Jesus? Or have we stuck with our Catholic faith out of habit or routine or because someone else says I have to, or worse, because of fear of God -- God who is all-goodness and love, who is closer to us than the air we breathe. An old poster I used to see in some church halls and classrooms is still relevant today: If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Growing in our faith, achieving Christian maturity, requires a decision on the part of each of us. This day I choose to follow Jesus by dedicating to him all that I will say and do. This day I will let the mind and heart of Jesus help to shape and form the way that I think and feel. Today I will accept whatever challenges I face, knowing that I am not alone because the Lord is by my side, strengthening and guiding me, loving me and encouraging me.

If you were arrested for being a Christian, would they have enough evidence to convict you?

Once we accept God’s invitation and take the Lord as our walking partner, fears about the future fall by the wayside. We can face the future without anxiety or
apprehension. And not just face it, but create it. We can take St. Paul’s advice and follow his example, really working hard for the sake of the gospel. We can build a future society where status or wealth won’t blind us to the needs of the poor, where education as excellent as yours and mine is available to everyone. We can build a world where children won’t go to bed hungry or war and violence be a daily companion. We can build a church where the gifts of each member are freely shared and eagerly received, where love and freedom in the Spirit hold sway and where human need takes precedence over man-made tradition.

In the face of the fear and powerlessness we often feel today, the apocalyptic writings of the bible and thoughts of the “end of the world” can move us to a better center from which we can face each day. Fear immobilizes us and clouds our thinking, but faith in God and prayerful confidence in our future victory in Christ can help us regain our composure. Disaster will strike -- that’s the way of the world -- but disaster isn’t an excuse for abandoning our Christian mission and our vocation as faithful followers of Jesus. It is this kind of courageous faith to which today’s gospel calls us; a faith that will not allow us to shirk from or try to cover up the stress and pressures involved in daily living, but to face them with hope, fidelity and patient endurance.

At the end of the day we should be exhausted... Christianity is not an idea in the air; it’s feet on the ground going God’s way. It’s hard to be a hero when no one expects anything from you, but the challenge of the gospel makes unbelievable demands on us. It guarantees hardship and opposition, betrayal and even persecution, and then Christ expects us to endure these things patiently. Only a hero could follow such a demanding path. And it happens to be the path that you and I are standing on as followers of Jesus. May God’s grace give us the courage to stand firm with an unshaken faith and to walk forward with the conviction of people whose victory is guaranteed.

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