



THE RIGHT REVEREND GREGORY H. RICKEL, BISHOP OF THE DIOCESE OF OLYMPIA
THE TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, NOVEMBER 18, 2018
DANIEL 12:1-3; PSALM 16:5-11; HEBREWS 10:11-14, 19-25; MARK 13:1-8

BISHOP'S VISITATION SERMON

In May of 1911, on the day when the Ship Titanic was launched, an employee of the White Star Line, the Builder of the ship, was famously quoted by a reporter as saying, "Not even God himself could sink this ship." We all know the story. Confidence was so high, in this new humanmade colossus, that the management made the decision not to burden the ship with the required lifeboats. We also know the results. On its maiden voyage, it struck an iceberg, and went down, and more than 1500 lives were lost, mostly because there were not enough lifeboats.

Several weeks ago, there existed a town in California, called Paradise. Maybe some of you knew it. I actually didn't. Of course, we all know it now, and we all know that most of it is gone. Burned, street by street, not subtly, or by the slow death of so many towns in our country, but quickly, brutally, mortally. At this hour they sift through the ashes trying to locate missing people, those that could not flee, could

not out run the fire storm, which was reportedly moving at the speed of 8 football fields a minute.

Josh Hosler, Rector of Good Shepherd, Federal Way, in a discussion on this Gospel this past week, said he intended, in his sermon, to start with the words Paradise is on fire. It is an irony, and a reality. I saw a story of a woman standing outside her home there, completely burned down to the foundation, and she stated, with tears in her eyes, "it as if God has checked out, forgotten about us, this is hell on earth."

We have all been there. Thinking exactly what she is thinking, wondering, what kind of God would allow such a thing to happen. I want you to hold that thought, and then think about the disciples sitting with Jesus, on the Mt of Olives. I have been fortunate over the course of the last 10 years, to stand in that spot, we never miss it. If you have been there you know the view is spectacular, looking back right across the Kidron Valley at the Temple

Mount, that Gold Dome that so represents Jerusalem, and right where the Temple stood, where the Western Wall, one of its remains, is so revered to this day. It is a beautiful site, and perhaps one of, if not the most tense, and contentious spots on earth.

In fact, there may not be a spot, so known, so prayed for, so contested anywhere else in the world. In a way, most of the world has a claim on it. Some have even called it the naval, the belly button of the world, that one spot. The disciples were looking across, at that spot, and living in a time that seemed just as perilous, just as lost. They, to a degree, had to be wondering just like we do.

While they sat there, wars were going on, armies were actually advancing in the direction of Jerusalem, natural disasters had happened, and would continue to happen.

Some historians, have subtlety, and not so subtlety mocked Jesus' prophecies here, the ones saying there will be wars and rumors of wars, and nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines.

Unless you are truly living in a cave, real or metaphorical, surely you cannot miss the fact that one could prophesy such things in about any time in history and get it right. It's really not that hard to do!

And our day is no different, we have the worst refugee crisis in our world with more people displaced and, on the move, than any time in recorded history, we have earthquakes, wars and rumors of wars, we have famines, to some of the worst degrees ever. That has never changed, and it didn't change after the crucifixion and the resurrection either. Mt Vesuvius erupted just 80 years after Jesus death and resurrection, wars and famines continued. And so, it is a timeless question, what kind of God would allow such things to continue to happen?

Well, I don't even pretend to offer an answer to that today. It is an age-old question. I have lots of thoughts about it. One is that simply, the world is a random place, I think Jesus was truly, prophesying that simple fact in this story, that day on the Mt. Of Olives, and in much of his ministry.

I have often said that bumper sticker that says "stuff Happens" but uses a little bit more expressive language, is actually a profound theological statement, and I believe that.

That is the truth of this world, this planet we inhabit. Mass extinctions have happened on this planet over and over in the course of its long life, and they will happen again, and eventually some believe we will kill this planet, our island home, and it will All disappear.

Maybe we could change the parable then to, the disciples were standing on another planet, looking back at magnificent Earth, beautiful, majestic, seemingly timeless and eternal, and Jesus said, even that will disappear, as magnificent as it is, it too, will go, one day.

All of it sounds dismal and morbid on the face of it, and I don't intend to be doing that, or taking you there, and I don't think Jesus did either, because his point, and mine is, our faith really, begs us to see it differently, to see it hopefully.

Maybe I should bring it back closer to home. Look up at this massive temple. It is impressive. In a way, this Cathedral is the Temple of Seattle, people can see it from a lot of angles, people know it, even if they don't know what it is, and even more what goes on in here. You might think of the disciples sitting on Queen Anne hill, looking back at Capitol Hill at the great temple, St. Mark's. Now this is closer to home isn't it. We just raised 10 million dollars to fix this temple up, to make it last another century or more and I can tell you that effort was amazing, and I want to simply say here, thank you St. Marks, for the way you steward this place. It is an amazing thing that has been done with this and needed. And I think that gets right to what Jesus was really saying to his disciples that day, on the Mt. Of Olives, looking back at Jerusalem and especially the temple.

There is nothing wrong with admiring the work of our hands, the beauty of this Temple, but it means nothing, if what emanates from it, what good comes out of it, how what goes on inside it, does nothing to change the world.

If it is not about that, its grandeur, its splendor, its mightiness, its glory, its strength, means nothing. It might as well fall into ruin and be gone. And it will, someday, for some reason, even with all of our work. And in the face of that inevitable day, Jesus was saying, the truth, power, and reality of God will remain.

Buildings are worthless if what is going on inside, and coming out from them from the inside, is not life giving and inspiring. This is where I would say, St. Mark's, you excel. There is something going on, and going out, of this place, and I am biased I know, but I feel you continue to do what you do here, with the main purpose of going out those doors, and proclaiming and living the Good News out there. We don't always get that right, no one does, but you do more often than not.

You will remember Jesus also referred to our bodies as temples, that the same is true of all of us, what goes on inside and then comes out of us is more important than the way we look or sound, or how important we are.

Those stepping forward for baptism and confirmation, and to reaffirm their faith today are stepping even deeper into that

belief, that reality, getting closer to that world beyond this one. And they are vowing to live as if they believe that to be true, that our faith is not in the structures of this world, or of human hands, but all things that come from God.

That conversion is marked in baptism, by water, and is symbolized by a dying to self, dying to all the world says will save us, and rising again, out of that water, a new being, a part of another realm, that believes in the world beyond all we see and know now.

Jesus ends his discussion on the Mt. of Olives, with these words, “but these are the beginnings of the birth pangs.” We always take that so hard, with such distress, in a kind of apocalyptic sense. This passage is even known as Mark’s little apocalypse, but I am not so sure we got that right, for what this says is something new is being born. Jesus says, take all of this in, but don’t get lost in it, don’t worship it, don’t rely on it, don’t fear it, there is more to come, there is better to come, there is a kingdom beyond all that we see, and it is there, where your true citizenship rests, where you, baptized child of God, belong. Baptism, and really every time we renew those vows, as we

will do today, is our hope and prayer, to be born again, and know ourselves as forgiven, loved, and free.

Naming a place Paradise does not assure it will be that, not in this world. The greatest building, with the most beauty, and most solid construction, can still be destroyed, and guarantees nothing. Ships, no matter how well built, can sink. No matter how we appear on the outside, no matter what our worth to the world and in the world, it is what is inside that matters, and even then, we all will die. And none of the outward stuff, the appearances, the construction, the massive stones, nor indeed, the methods of destruction, fires, earthquakes, floods, gun violence, famine, borders, governments, can change for one moment, the most precious and eternal truth of God’s Kingdom, that God is love, and God does love each and every one of us equally, unconditionally, completely. Everything material will go, eventually, no matter what it is made of, but that truth, God’s love for us, remains, always.

My sisters and brothers, I have said these words to you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.