

“Faithful When Things Are Good, Faithful When They Aren’t”
Emmett Powers, Pastor, Minister of Word and Sacrament
St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Beaumont
November 18, 2018

I might just as well have titled this sermon, “Don’t Let Anyone Lead You Astray.” Or maybe, “The Sky is Falling,” or, “Did you ever see a sign that said watch for Falling Rocks?” Or, “This is my best one— “Did you ever go a-fishin’ on a bright sunny day with your hands in your pockets and the log rolled away? “It’s like Jesus double downs on his lesson because he adds, “because there are many they lead away.” This sermon precedes next Sunday when the last day of our church year come around again. The service is called Christ the King, or Reign of Christ Sunday, but it assumes that we have been faced once again with an awe-inspiring question? Can we really be faithful to God no matter what? Next Sunday affirms the answer, “Yes, we can.” And you Jesus, are our Lord!”

In this gospel reading, Jesus takes up the subject about anyone of an enigmatic group of people he called “they.” Jesus perceived that when the eventual, and inevitable clash came among the Roman empire, the Jewish status quo, and the followers of Christ the disciples they would have to be make some decisions. Could they be faithful to see the new kingdom come? The Jews were already demanding fealty to their traditions. The Romans demanded loyalty to their king. In fact, the mandatory ritual of defeat by the Roman conquerors required the bowing of heads as the vanquished were required to walk under a low bar in order “to bend the knee to Rome.” (James Webb, 2004, 27). You will recall that Paul wrote the Philippians (2:9-11) from his Roman jail cell, proclaiming that when the time came, there would be no other name given under heaven whereby humans could be saved, and that at that name every knee will bow and proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord.” Obviously, Caesar had nothing to look for that was so universal. Paul, as you will recall, died as a martyr because he made no bones about his faithfulness to Jesus and Christianity.

The text is not so much about telling the future, since the disciples could not conceive of the idea of a catastrophic demise to the temple. Remember, we are talking about the temple, not just a small synagogue. “To put things in perspective, the long Western Wall of the Temple Mount was 1590 feet long (the length of about 4.5 football fields) . . . The white back of the Temple . . . stood about 10 to 16 stories tall.” There was a square courtyard, 233 feet on each side (for comparison, a football field is 360 feet long). Within it stood four massive

lampstands, each 86 feet tall.”¹ Estimates by experts tell us that 200 workers could produce about eight cubic meters of cut stone each day. That means one cubic meter of [the] stone *ashlar* would require about 120 hours of labor to cut and dress.² One stone on the corner of the temple was measuring 39 feet 4 inches long by 7 feet 10 inches wide and 43 inches high. The large stone shown here is called the master course stone and weighs about 80 tons. The largest stone is 41 feet long and weighs about 600 tons. So, how could these stones get knocked down? What could possibly be so massive that it could take down Herod’s legacy and the Jew’s temple all in one fell swoop? It had to be impossible! And, yet, in time, in a very short time, it did.

It was about the handwriting that was on the wall: things were going to get worse before they get better. Who would have thought it would have taken as long as three hundred years for Christians to have a place at the table in the new Rome? Thus, the disciples had to think abstractly about an incredible possibility. But, if something like that did happen, and Jesus said it would, what were their options. They could run, hide, fight, or worse-case scenario, be absorbed into something else that was not even the kingdom of God in Jesus’s teaching. The first was that the gospel of Jesus was the only authentic way forward into the future, the Romans, and the Jews notwithstanding. Second, they would have to determine that they would be faithful to Jesus no matter what. Whether the times for them were good now or not. And, third, the disciples could not succumb to the pressure of a pagan government over society. After his death, they could not be members of just another Jewish sect. They couldn’t let any local or globalized system force marginalize them. So, in way, the death of Jesus could generate a potential point in the outgrowth of the gospel that the disciples would have to consider “bending a knee” to those who would lead them down a different path.

In some ways, I think every generation, like these disciples, is tasked with a decision about whether to be faithful despite the cultural forces that attempt unintentionally, and sometimes intentionally, to lead them down a pagan path. The oft quoted Dietrich Bonhoeffer called out the Christians during World War II. He was disgusted with the failure of the church to remain separate from the state when he wrote, “Jesus Christ lived in the midst of his enemies. At the end all his disciples deserted him. On the Cross he was utterly alone, surrounded by evildoers and mockers. For this cause he had come, to bring peace to the enemies of God. So the Christian, too, belongs not in the seclusion of a cloistered life but in the thick of foes. There is his commission, his work. 'The kingdom is to be in the midst of your enemies. And he who will not suffer this does not want to be of the Kingdom of

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/what-did-the-temple-look-like-in-jesus-time/> (accessed November 17, 2018).

² <http://www.generationword.com/jerusalem101/33-ashlar-stones.html> (accessed November 17, 2018).

Christ; he wants to be among friends, to sit among roses and lilies . . . , If Christ had done what you are doing who would ever have been spared' (Luther).” — Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I think that is where Jesus was going with this object lesson. If he were not faithful in the middle of his own enemies, how could he ask them to be faithful among their own after his death? And, obviously, if they could not be faithful among all their enemies that would surface during a political conflagration, who else but them would be able to usher in the kingdom of God for the generations to follow, including ours? Jesus might have said that it might be great to have their 15 minutes of fame with the Rabbi in the most politically powerful and structurally iconic building in Jerusalem, but how would they act in word and deed when it all laid in ruins.

It’s so difficult for us in America to imagine any time coming for us that would be so cataclysmic as the destruction of the temple. Yet, there is indeed yet handwriting on the wall we must heed. There is within our own society another kind of cataclysm. At one time some of us thought it was Nazism, but we stopped that with military might. Later we worried about communism, but we put that in check with MADD. Then, we thought it would be radical Islam, with which we have been at war for almost three decades. Lately, we have given some thought to other impossibilities like a war with China or North Korea. But I believe that we are already witnessing in our time the first sounds of dislodging stones in the towns and villages of America.

An article in *Christianity Today* by Karl Vaters (December 6, 2017) begins: I’ve never lived in a predominantly Christian culture. But lately, I’ve been travelling a lot through the Bible Belt, so I’m seeing what a Christian culture looks like for the first time in my life. Churches on every corner, Christian radio and TV on more than one station, and worship songs as background music in a restaurant where almost every table says grace before they eat. But it also feels like I’m seeing something before it’s gone forever. Like when I was a college student catching a second-run movie at an art house theater where the film was scratchy and missing a few frames. You knew it was on its last legs. If you want to see what a predominantly Christian culture looks like, take a trip through the Bible Belt. But do it soon. Like the autumn leaves, it won’t be there much longer.”

As recently as 2007 to 2014, in fact, mainline Protestant denominations, including Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians, and Methodists, lost nearly 5 million adult members, according to Pew Research. Today, however, there are signs that many of the same trends that decimated mainline Protestantism over the past few decades are now at work among evangelical denominations as well. According to a massive study by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI),” the number of white evangelical Protestants fell from about 23 percent of the US population in 2006 to 17 percent in 2016.” (*Pew Research*, October 12, 2017)

We can't run from it. We can't hide from it. But we can be faithful. Just as you and your families were faithful in times past when congregations had it so good you must decide to be faithful now. We can't throw stones at others who are on a different path than us who are meeting with success. But we can be Faithful. We CAN be faithful. WE can be faithful. We can be faithful when times are good, and we can be faithful when they aren't. For each of you it is a decision you may have already made. As you make your way to Christ the King Sunday bring with you your sacrifice of praise and worship, content in your faithfulness to God. With Advent nearer than ever before, we will find hope in Christ' coming again as he has come before. When, he comes, we will be found faithful to him. That, my friends, is all he asks of us.