

Pentecost 26 C 2016

Preached to the community of Grace University Lutheran Church
by Pastor Mary Halvorson
November 13, 2016

Daily texts:

Malachi 4:1-2a

Psalm 98 (not included in worship)

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19

Years ago Dan and I visited my college roommate who was living in Northern Ireland. Her home sat in a magical location for this mid western couple. The windows of her two hundred year old home looked out onto the Irish Sea. The waves were mesmerizing; the water and sky shared the same shadowy blue grey color. One day we took her dog for a long walk. Our pathway was wet sand that, just a few hours earlier, was covered by seawater. It was low tide. Here was the underbelly—the stuff that had always been there, was now revealed. We walked around debris and garbage, bits of wood and weeds that were spindly and slimy, not beautiful. The imprint of our shoes would soon be washed away by the incoming high tide. We found hidden treasures: beautiful shells, some shiny and new, others broken and imperfect. That long, wide stretch of sand and debris was not charming or pretty; it laid bare a lot of ugliness and chaos; exposed all kinds of trash people had carelessly thrown into the water. It was an eerie mixture of litter and disorder and the seas' art collection of shells. I admit, I prefer high tide with its watery and concealing comfort, to the exposed and candid ocean floor.

It's low tide in today's gospel. Luke's reading audience has lived through the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem; its stone walls have been leveled to the ground. It once sat at the heart of Jewish religious life; a magnificent structure covered with gold reflecting the sun's rays, and from a distance was a mountain wrapped in snow.

Today's text finds Jesus' confronting his disciples as they admire the temple. They are awe struck and impressed by its grandeur. That slippery slope toward idolatry, worshipping the Temple complex itself, raises a red flag for Jesus. How easy it is to set worship and love of God aside for things, people, and structures that will crumble and dissolve. How prone we are to idolatry.

Bricks and mortar do not last, systems fail, institutions have a limited shelf life, administrations come and go, ideologies fade and are replaced. We are warned to not fixate on or trust that which cannot last. God will not be found embedded in temple walls, or be confined in an impressive location or leader. God is found everywhere and most clearly where there is a witness to God's love and mercy, through acts of service and justice.

To understand what lies at the heart of Luke's 21st chapter, we must read through the lens of apocalyptic literature. *Apocalyptic* means to reveal, to address the foreboding of what is to come. Its language and imagery are unsettling and graphic, but it's not meant to snuff out hope. This is not a Halloween haunted house to scare and put fear in our bones. No. These words are meant to encourage the faithful to trust God, to hold on, hang tight, not give up, especially in terrifying times.

People are anxious and afraid—what is to come after such destruction? How are we to be at such a time as this? The very institution we banked our lives on, looked to as a sign for God's presence among us has crumbled. Where, to whom do we turn for hope?

Do not be terrified, Jesus tells his followers. He echoes the angels' words as they cheered on Hagar, Jeremiah, Elijah, Paul and the women at the tomb, shocked at its emptiness. Angels show up in the earthquakes of unrest and war, shipwrecks and deportations, division and polarization, unusual births and death-defying resurrection.

Every generation faces challenges that seem insurmountable, that feel too big. This is when faith is tried and tested. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, to suffering, to the cross, the lynching tree of his time. He tells his followers, "You will, too, be rejected and face persecution, this is a divisive time." Family members and co-workers will battle and be at odds. Thanksgiving dinners will not be pleasant; you will spar, if not in person, then on Facebook. You will quit talking and unfriend those whose opinions and vote you can't accept.

Today, as we gather at this difficult time in our nation, many of you are devastated, shocked, undone and saddened by the election results. You fear for the future. Others are satisfied your candidate won.

This election has brought us to low tide. Division, pain, anger, and fear are laid bare by its receding waters. We see clearly what we don't want to see. We are surprised and concerned by what is revealed. There is a painful divide—between rural and urban lives, in matters of race, class and gender. We fear what lies ahead. The tide is out; the debris is stark. A deep gulf stretches a long way.

In these unsettling and disruptive times, Jesus tells us, you have an opportunity to testify, to be a witness. You will be given the words—the text literally says, you will be given a mouth and the wisdom for what is needed. There is clarity, however painful. We know more about who we are. And on that exposed ocean floor, we must remember there are hidden gems to hunt and discover together. We must learn and be cracked open, so more light can shine. God will see to it.

More than ever the church needs to be bolder, more courageous and daring. We bear witness together. When a hateful word is hurled, or spray-painted, as it was on the Muslim student association sign on the Washington Ave Bridge, cover it with colorful hands of love. *Be a witness.*

When a sexist or derogatory remark is made about a woman's body, we must remember we are all made in the image of God; all have a right to be safe from harm, insult and abuse, we must respond and counter the degrading of anyone's personhood. *Be a witness.*

When veterans return home and struggle to find work and healing, we must receive and embrace them. *Be a witness.*

When immigrant children come to school afraid their parents will be deported, look them in the eye, as my neighbor tells me his staff does where he is the principal, look them in the eye and say, we are so glad you are here. *Be a witness.*

The color of our skin cannot be a reason to harm, demean and assume the worst in any person. We can no longer be blinded to privilege and systemic racism. *Be a witness.*

We must stand alongside and with those marginalized and vulnerable in any way—the Muslim woman yelled at in public, the gay couple afraid they may not be able to marry, the transgender man fearing for his life. The unemployed steelworker frightened there is no job to support his family. *Be a witness.*

We must engage in humane conversation with those whose concerns and fears differ from our own, we must stretch ourselves to hear what lies deep within, and speak truth in love. *Be a witness.*

Today, as you leave, you are invited to write on the sidewalk in front of Grace—completing the sentence with words and pictures, a beautiful community is... *Be a witness.*

Safety pins brought by Sunday school teacher Barb, will be handed out as you leave worship. You are invited to wear them as a symbol of solidarity with victims of racism, homophobia and religious discrimination. It is not a political symbol, but an anti-hatred symbol. *Be a witness.*

Today handmade quilts grace the altar, lovingly made by Karen Franzmeier and her Grace quilting group. They will be given to Kubisa and Neema's family, and shared with students in the Congo working for a better life. *These quilts are a witness.*

The call is clear—we cannot be naïve—there is reconciliation to forge, gaps to bridge, love to testify to, faith to embody, justice to pursue.

We are God's living stones, the church; we have not crumbled, we will not be afraid. God gives us a mouth, the words, the courage—to not hate or be vengeful, to not denigrate or disparage another. As Christians we know there is no room for Klan activity, Jim Crow thinking, hate crimes and violence. The tide is out, we see what needs to be done and we get to work, we confess our complicity, we lean on each other, we ask for help, we pray, we act, we build community, we get involved, we befriend a stranger.

God is here. We are not alone. Amen.