

Sermon SPBX – November 13, 2016 – The Rev. Jamie Samilio

The Gospel today followed a familiar pattern. It started by talking about beautiful things, gave some ominous warnings, and then gave us hope. It sounded to me like a TV commercial from a drug company -- you know the kind I mean, right? They show happy, active people, they warn of side effects, and finally reassure you that despite all that, the drug will be a blessing in your life. They sound something like this:

***“You have a lot of living to do, and Soilent Pink can help you thrive. Just one pill a day can make you smarter, thinner, clear your skin, improve your memory, heart function, and increase motor skills. Side effects include dysentery, vomiting, insomnia, bloating, dizziness, and in some cases death. You deserve a good life, ask your doctor to prescribe SoilentPink today.”***

Fun to think about, but there is a serious message we need to pay attention to in today's scriptures. The temple Jesus refers to in the Gospel was magnificent, and a re-building project by King Herod in 19BC – it doubled the size of the original – it was grand and had many outer courts they continued to build and develop even after the main temple was completed (about 18 months). It was amazing – yet in 70AD it was destroyed by the Romans, only a year after it was totally finished.

Jesus was talking about future times of false leadership, violence, suffering, arrests, persecution and endurance! Also of note, between 4BC (BCE) and 70 AD(CE) there were no less than 15 leaders who defied the Romans and were destroyed – some claiming to be Divine, the Messiah.

Then there were earthquakes and signs, and finally before, during, and after all of this was happening – persecution, trials, and tribulations would be part of the lives of the faithful. Jesus warned that many would come and lead the people astray.

Keep in mind that the Jews were living under Roman occupation. They were being taxed on top of working to care for themselves and their families, and getting ahead, saving for lean times was tough, because it seemed like everywhere they faced taxes, or cheating tax collectors – sound familiar? A few scriptures ago, we heard a story of a rich man, who ignored a beggar at his gate everyday, until he died, was being punished, and begging for mercy.

The bottom line to THAT Gospel was, that we have been told what we are supposed to do in order to be in right relationship with God and each other – multiple messengers have been sent, Jesus himself has said it directly to us. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul, and love your neighbors, as yourself.

The Gospel today sounds a lot like the news today. The temple in our case is a large and magnificent icon that stands just a few miles from here and is the symbol of “The Republic” for which it stands. While the brick and mortar building is not destroyed, I think each time we switch gears politically, our “temple” the place where we put our trust for our futures, is torn down. We see earthquakes, rising waters, and other signs. We are taxed, and there is persecution, trials, and tribulations in our lives.

The recent election seems to have brought out the worst in people, and the language used on both sides has been inappropriate, painful, and does not show love for God or our neighbors.

After hearing all of this, I want to remind you again of what Jesus said, *“But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.”* This is an invitation NOT to be terrified, but to trust. And, if we must endure, then this tells me that we will continue to at odds with our neighbors, and that the issues at play in the Gospel and in our lives today, will not be swiftly resolved and put behind us. *So fasten your seatbelts, this is going to be a bumpy ride!*

If we look for the Grace in the Gospel, I think we find it in the assurance that in the end, we shall not be harmed, and that is a message of hope for our futures. It is difficult to feel safe and hold onto hope in the midst of the battles of our daily lives, but that is really what we are called to do – to hang onto the hope and the promise of the Gospel.

If I say to you, “These are troubled times.” It begs the question, what times are there, ever, that have not or will not have trouble? There will be trouble always, somewhere and for someone.

I do not think the Gospel is telling us anything we are not prepared to hear or that we do not already know. We are human, we are subject to the laws of nature, we are vulnerable in the face of natural disasters, and human conflicts that harm us mentally, emotionally, and physically. We know this – we know we are subject to evil and death, no real surprise here. But, we do get hung up on why this all happens to us, and we look to blame someone.

*On a September 13, 2001, appearance on The 700 Club, Rev. Jerry Falwell blamed the 9/11 terrorist attacks on certain groups and organizations he characterized as promoting “an alternative lifestyle” and trying to “secularize America.”<sup>1</sup> Austrian priest Rev. Gerhard Wagner wrote in a 2005 parish newsletter that Hurricane Katrina resulted from the indescribable amoral conditions of New Orleans.<sup>2</sup> Recently, the Westboro Baptist Church has attained notoriety for this line of thinking.\**

When disaster strikes a community, like Hurricane Katrina, or 911 or to some 119, many -- and I will call them false prophets – emerge and blame our lifestyle choices for bringing the wrath of God on our heads. Bottom Line here is this: God does not use wars and natural disasters to punish people for sins, or for going against the beliefs of a certain group of believers.

The point is that when bad things happen -- and they will -- we should “not be terrified” or follow anyone proclaiming these are signs of God’s judgment and the end. Instead, we should trust that God remains present in our lives, especially in difficult times, and we should strive to be as faithful to God, as God is faithful to us.

Being faithful means understanding that we can only control how we respond to trouble, having hope and knowing we are redeemed. My words and my actions are all I can control. I am still human however, and I can easily fall prey to a false prophet – especially if that prophet is saying things I like and agree with.

I don't know how you feel, but I want a guide to follow on how I/we should respond to the conflicts, trials, and people who would harm us. A place where can we turn for guidance, especially since Jesus warned that many would come and lead the people astray.

How we discern the call of God from the voice of evil is to test it. What does this person, who comes promising redemption, say that upholds the two great commandments?

If their words, and as importantly their actions, support love, relationship building, creating thriving communities – show love to God and their neighbors -- then they pass the test. *“So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.”* Live in the moment. There is no need to spend our lives worried about what our next move might be if someone else moves first, trust God instead. When God gives us wisdom, it comes in the form of words grounded on a foundation of love.”

If I take stock in a self-guide that will inform my own actions, then I can simply measure up what I say and do against the two great commandments to love, but an additional measure can be found in our Baptismal covenant. Before you speak and act or react to what is going on in the world around us, ask yourself if your words and actions align with our covenant.

*Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?*

*Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?*

*Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?*

*Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?*

*Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?*

*Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?\** And that means live your life following Jesus' examples of love, acceptance, and forgiveness.

The references to the temple in the passage are really warnings about becoming too fixated on things that are temporal, and not focusing on God's promise of the eternal. We are fixated on the beautiful things we have built, the earthly comforts we have created – we are proud of our achievements in accumulating wealth and building monuments. I think the Gospel is trying to tell us that instead we should be proud of our accomplishments in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and sheltering the homeless. Ultimately this passage is about hope -- hope that God is with us in this world and our lives everyday, even the bad days. The takeaway from the Gospel is the importance of trusting in God even in the midst of hardship and persecution. The next time you open your mouth – remember first to open your heart.

Endure and do what we have been commanded to do, love God and love each other. And hold onto the hope in the Gospel message, and as Rev. Liz said in her communication this week, take stock in the quote from the movie “The Most Exotic Merrigold Hotel” *“In the end, everything will be all right. If everything is not all right, then it is not yet the end!”* Better yet, take stock in the words from Malachi *“But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.”* **Amen**

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-CAcdta\\_8I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-CAcdta_8I)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/pope-rescinds-hiring-of-katrina-priest/>

\* [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3059](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3059)

\*\*BCP p. 302