### “Be Not Led Astray” Steve Finlan for The First Church, November 13, 2022

**Isaiah 12:1–4**

3 You will say on that day: I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me.

2 Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

3 With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. 4And you will say on that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted.

**Luke 21:5–8, 20–24**

5When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, 6 “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

7 They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” 8And he said, “Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them. . .

20 “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. 21Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those inside the city must leave it, and those out in the country must not enter it; 22for these are days of vengeance, as a fulfillment of all that is written. 23Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! . . . 24Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles.”

The passage in Isaiah 12 reads like a psalm to me. This narrative states that God was angry with the author, and then ceased to be angry. As many psalms do, it makes assurances of salvation, and promises the reader: “with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” (12:3). The reader is exhorted to give thanks to God, and to proclaim his name to the nations.

These emotional and exhortatory elements sound so much like a psalm that it makes me wonder if, perhaps, Isaiah wrote it with the intention of its being used in a service at the Temple. Despite Isaiah’s criticism of the sacrificial ritual in chapter 1, he elsewhere shows respect for the Temple system, and he has his own commissioning experience (where he says “Here am I; send me,” Isa 6:8) and vision of angels, seraphim actually, while he is in the Temple.

In our second reading, the apostles wonder what Jesus thinks of the Temple with its famous marble, its pillars, its courtyards. The Temple was a well known landmark, and a marvel to look upon. Jesus says this magnificent temple will all be thrown down. They ask him when this will happen. First he warns them against listening to false messiahs.

Perhaps the false messiahs were those who started the rebellion against Rome forty years later. The Zealots, or the nationalist party in Judah, staged an uprising against the Romans. They killed the Roman garrison in Jerusalem’s Antonia Fortress, though some Roman officials managed to flee. The Zealots compelled the nation to arm itself, and organized to be ready for war. They did not claim a single Messiah, but their whole leadership had a messiah-like vision of the necessity of warring against foreigners.

History shows that their rebellion triggered the only war that Rome had to fight during this period, the Jewish War, which the Romans won decisively. Many Jewish rebel leaders were captured and killed. Many other Jews fled the region entirely. This is what we call the Diaspora, the dispersion of Jews throughout the region, to Asia Minor, Greece, Italy, and North Africa.

In our passage, we see Jesus prophesying the destruction of the Temple, and he warns Jerusalemites to flee the city when they see it surrounded by foreign troops. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, these prophecies are sometimes mingled with his prophecy about his promised return, but these should be kept separate. The war against Rome and the destruction of the Temple were things that happened forty years after Jesus’ departure, while the promised return has still not happened yet.

Traditional Jewish thought was that one of the proofs of a prophet’s validity was that he made accurate predictions (Deut 18:22). Jesus’ prediction of the destruction of the Temple came true, and for Jewish Christians, was a proof of his legitimacy as a prophet. Further, Jesus showed his compassion by expressing kindly concern about those who will be pregnant.

Another thing a true prophet does is warn against the activities of false prophets. Jesus does this here: “Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them” (21:8). This is a warning that could apply at many different periods in history.

He could be warning about the Jewish nationalists who started the war with Rome, or about other false prophets. Another Jewish uprising, in the second century, led by Simon bar Kochba, was accompanied by claims by his followers that bar Kochba was the Messiah. And we have such false prophets today, such as the founder of the Children of God sect, David Berg, who claimed to be a prophet. In this group, sadly, many children were sexually exploited. The founder of the Moonies, the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, believed he was personally anointed by Jesus. He considered himself to be the spiritual Second Coming of Christ, but not Jesus himself (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_messiah_claimants>). Certain narcissistic types, highly religious, but with an inflated sense of self-importance may become false messiahs. We can take Jesus’ warning as a warning against *all* such religious egotists, who can arise in any generation. Let your inner light and your reflective powers guide you if you meet such a person.

Much better to have religious leaders with a sense of humility, such as Isaiah, who said “I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips” (Isa 6:5), or Jeremiah who spoke for the whole nation when he said “we have sinned against the Lord our God” (Jer 3:25).

A healthy religious attitude recognizes one’s smallness as compared with God’s greatness. It expresses amazement that “God is my salvation” (Isa 12:2), and it knows that, not one’s own name, but “*his* name is exalted” (12:4). Normal humility will be a noticeable feature of any well-balanced religious leader. Even Jesus had this humility, although he knew he had divine status, for he said “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone” (Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19).

Jesus cared enough about his followers to give warnings. He cares about his followers here and now, and finds ways to turn afflictions into blessings. We can be unafraid, if we can say “God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation” (Is 12:2). What is our protection? It is a combination of honest faith and discerning insight. We need to “test the spirits” (1 John 4:1), question them spiritually. Such spiritual sensitivity along with psychological insight enables us to recognize an unhealthy spirituality or an imbalance of the mind. Pride and a domineering spirit are sure signs of imbalance.

True leaders will show maturity, self-control, generosity, and humility. False prophets always show their true nature by lacking one or more of these elements. Some of them show a lack of self-control when they rage against those they think are their enemies. Or they show a lack of generosity by bullying people, or a lack of humility by making grandiose claims about themselves.

Look for Jesus-like leadership: balance, compassion, honest concern, a lack of hatred for enemies, but a mature understanding of the dangers that we can face, an awareness of the potential for evil from humans. We already possess God-given gifts, strength and insight to draw upon in times of stress.

And if we must fight, we do so without hatred, but with a determination that criminality must be stopped. The most mature of our veterans match that description, but there are also ones who have been damaged, *morally* damaged by war, and they need psychological and spiritual help. Let us pray for all our veterans, who have been tested, and for ourselves as well when we are given our life challenges. Know that God is with you and will guide you through these moments.