### “Times of the Gentiles” Steve Finlan for The First Church, December 1, 2024

**1 Thess 3:10–13**

10Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. 12 May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. 13And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

**Luke 21:20–24**

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. . . 23Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress on the earth and wrath against this people; 24they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

I’ve already preached about Jesus’ message to the apostles, warning of the coming war with Rome. Two weeks ago, we looked at the Mark passage (13:2) that foretold the destruction of the Temple. Here, in Luke, is a similar warning. Luke gives a more complete telling of the crushing defeat that Jerusalem will experience, and ends with speaking of “the times of the Gentiles [being] fulfilled” (21:24). In both passages, he warns his followers that they must flee, and it seems that the Christians who were in Judea did flee to the east, to Pella, across the Jordan River. There is also more emotional power in Luke’s version, as he says “Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days!” (21:23). He knows how hard it is for young families in times of war.

Besides warning them that they will need to flee for their lives, Jesus is also warning them that Jewish power will not be asserted. They need to get used to the fact that they are living in the times of the Gentiles.

In fact, the apostles had to be disillusioned and stripped of their nationalistic fantasies long before the Roman war, which lay forty years in the future. They had to find meaning and value in life apart from their hopes for Jewish supremacy, which never came to pass. The fabled Jewish dominion did not happen either during or after Jesus’ lifetime, so the apostles were forced to understand Jesus’ mission in other terms than those of dominion and revenge. They had to learn a new kind of hope, one linked to the promise of the afterlife, but also promising spiritual growth here in *this* lifetime. We see some of that in the First Thessalonians reading, where Paul prays that “the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all,” and “so strengthen your hearts in holiness” (1 Thess 3:12–13).

They learned to have hope and love in the present time, independently of Israel’s political position. So this is a lesson in finding meaning when one’s fondest hopes are frustrated. This happens to us all the time, doesn’t it, where our biggest hopes are not fulfilled, but we learn to find meaning and value in the lives we are living?

Viktor Frankl was an important psychologist who survived years in Hitler’s death camps, and discovered that the people who survived were people who had a *meaning* in life, a deep hope or heartfelt value that they still held onto, in spite of external circumstances. Often it was a hope to be reunited with family. Sometimes it was hope to be able to express something in music or science or literature. Sometimes it was a strong religious faith. After surviving the war, Frankl wrote a number of influential books, including *Man’s Search for Meaning*. In a posthumous book called *Embracing Hope* he writes about how people feel sad and alienated even in the most affluent societies if “the *will to meaning* remains unfulfilled”; there is an “*unheard cry for meaning*” (*Embracing Hope*, 39). He tells several stories about people who found meaning in life, including a man who broke his neck in a diving accident when he was 17, leaving him paralyzed from the head down. He was able to type with a wooden stick clamped between his teeth. He was able to attend university remotely, and gave papers. He was convinced that despite his suffering he was able to serve others who were paralyzed. He wrote that his life was “abundant with meaning and purpose” (*Embracing Hope*, 23).

What about this troubled world we live in, when world peace does not exist? What hope do we have? We have the hope brought by the Incarnation of the Savior on this world two thousand years ago. We have the hope that, if he is lifted up in people’s minds, that he will draw all people (John 12:32). We have the hope that relationships will be repaired, that, eventually, Jesus “will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe every tear from their eyes . . . death will be no more” (Rev 7:17; 21:4), as Revelation says. Jesus will say “see, I am making all things new . . . I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life” (Rev 21:5–6). All the knotty and complicated problems, all the hurts, all the limitations, will be solved and resolved. We will see the spiritual goal, and we will strive toward it. There will be a city where “the glory of God is its light . . . The nations will walk by its light” (Rev 21:23–24). And even on this earth, we may “increase and abound in love” (1 Thess 3:12), we may grow in strength and faith. This is our hope for the present and the future.

In Advent season we mark our hope for the coming of the Savior, not only into the world, but into our lives. As the mystic Meister Eckhart said, “what good is it if the Savior is born in Bethlehem, if he is not born in my soul?” We have this hope because we have this experience, the experience of Jesus living within us, moving us toward compassion and understanding. We sing “Lord, I want to be more loving in my heart.” That would make our lives meaningful, wouldn’t it?