

*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.” 7They 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. 9“When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.” 10Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; 11there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. 12“But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. 13This will give you an opportunity to testify. 14So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; 15for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. 16You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. 17You will be hated by all because of my name. 18But not a hair of your head will perish. 19By your endurance you will gain your souls.*

I wish I had a big TV in front of us this morning. We could go channel surfing together. How long would it take us to find some preacher telling us that the signs are all around us – the end is near? What would he point to? War in the Middle East? The mortgage crisis? Violence in our cities? Fires and floods and earthquakes and storms? Immorality portrayed in movies and on TV?

I was talking with someone the other day about all of these things that are going on now. I expected him to join me in a chorus of “Aren’t things scary and terrible?” He cut my panic short by saying, “It is always like this.”

It is.

When I began preaching it was Vietnam and a nation divided, and Watergate- soon to be followed by interest rates of 15%. OPEC and an oil crisis, the Iranian revolution, Washington and Moscow at each other's throat. Stock market bubbles bursting and AIDS and Y2K and 9/11 and Anthrax. And in every moment of all of that TV preachers have been saying these are the signs that the end is near.

One thousand nine hundred and fifty years ago some Christians in the city of Thessalonica looked around them at the times they were living in and they stopped going to work. "Jesus is coming any day now – why should we go to work anymore." So they did not.

The Paul, Silvanus and Timothy wrote a letter to the congregation there - telling them not to believe reports that were supposed to have come from them that the day of the Lord had already come. And they gave the command, "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat." Even though the whole world was falling apart the Christians in Thessalonica were called to faithful and responsible living.

Even before that Jesus spoke of what was coming. The temple of God in Jerusalem would be destroyed, not one stone will be left upon another. For Jesus' hearers that must have seemed like a sure sign that the end had come but Jesus' next words were these: "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. When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately."

In the midst of a world that was coming apart, Jesus warns his followers not to be misled. For he said that the future would bring nations rising against nations, and kingdom against kingdom; great earthquakes, famines and plagues, great signs in heaven. Even arrest would be coming for his followers. But Jesus said that he would give to them words and a wisdom that their opponents would not be able to contradict. Jesus said that even in families there would be betrayal – that some of his follower would be put to death.

But then just a sentence later he promises: "But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

Not a hair of your head will perish. Even for those put to death Jesus gives this promise. Obviously Jesus is not talking about physical safety in this world. Soon Jesus himself would be crucified and in the first days of the church Stephen and James would become martyrs. But Jesus promised his disciples that day and you this day that not a hair of your head will perish.

It is a way of saying, “You are in the hands of God.” In life and anything that can happen in this life, you are in the hands of God. And in death also – you are in the hands of God. If everyone else is letting anxiety and fear dominate their thoughts, conversations and living you will not – for you who believe in Jesus are in the hands of God. Even in the midst of wars and earthquakes and floods, even if Christians should be persecuted for our faith, you are in the hands of God.

Jesus is calling you to faith this day – faith that nothing can happen that will cancel God’s care for you. Even in suffering and dying and a world falling into chaos, nothing can cancel God’s care for you. God raised Jesus with every hair of his head intact. God will raise you.

So how shall we live? In idleness – just waiting for the end? No, there are people who are hurting – people who are afraid - people who are hating and harming. Jesus sends you to them. Jesus needs witnesses to tell them to hope in Jesus and to find a new way of living through faith in Jesus. Jesus needs you to speak and to live the good news that God will have the last word and that word is life for the dead. For God’s word is Jesus Christ. What an awful thing it is when the followers of Jesus waste our breath talking about how awful things are. We are called to witness to God’s victory over every enemy in Jesus Christ and to show that victory in the love and caring we give. The word, marturion, is the Greek word for witness – you are called to be martyrs, witnesses, for Christ.

This day commit your self to live and give in faith. Not to let your life be shaped by the day’s news but by the good news that Jesus lives and will rule eternally. You belong to him. Amen.