

Stand firm!

It was Tuesday of Holy Week. Two days earlier, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, proclaiming himself to be the promised Savior. People cheered him on as they waved palm branches. On Monday and Tuesday taught the people, especially through parables. For one last time he reached out to his enemies and offered them salvation. Their final answer was to reject him. How sad. After finishing his last Bible class on earth, Jesus started walking away but his disciples – seemingly oblivious to the sadness of the moment – could not help themselves from commenting on how amazing the temple looked.

The temple was one of the most amazing buildings in the world. The gates into the temple complex were 50' x 25' and were covered with silver and gold. Above the entrance to the temple itself, there was a decorative cluster of grapes made out of pure gold which was as tall as a man. Some of the foundation stones were 40' x 14' x 20'. HUGE. As I kept studying how magnificent the temple was, I realized that I was doing the same thing that the disciples did. I was getting caught up in the outward beauty of the temple. Much more important than the building is who the building represented. It represented Jesus and his own people had rejected him. How sad.

Jesus reminded his disciples that the physical building was not that important. He even told them that the temple would be completely destroyed, not one stone left on top of another. That happened in 70 AD, when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the temple. When they burned the temple, all the metal melted and dripped down into the cracks between the stones. The Roman soldiers then dug all those stones up to get every bit of gold, silver and bronze. Quite literally, not one stone was left on top of another. The disciples asked when this would happen. Again, Jesus redirected them. Much more important than knowing when destruction was coming, was being prepared for judgement. As Jesus continued, he used the coming destruction of Jerusalem as a symbol of the destruction coming on Judgment Day. One day, the world as we know it will be destroyed. We need to be ready. Jesus urges us to **Stand Firm!**

Jesus said there would be signs, or indicators, or warning signals, in the world that Judgment Day was coming. On Judgment Day no one can say that Jesus did not give them far warning. Jesus said that some people would claim to be the Messiah or would claim to represent him. That would be like adding poison to your drinking water – deadly dangerous! He said there

would be wars and revolutions as nations and kingdoms fight against each other. Last Friday, we commemorated Veterans' Day which began after World War I, which was called "the war to end all wars." That was over 100 years ago. The nations of the world are still fighting against each other. Jesus also said that there would be pestilences (think pandemic) and scary times. Everything Jesus preached has come true.

As we live in this sin-infected and dying world, it is easy to think that God is not in touch with reality, as if he is simply sitting up there on his heavenly throne enjoying himself as we suffer and struggle down here. That's what the Israelites thought as they were suffering as slaves in Egypt. God did not forget them. When the time was right, he sent Moses to lead them out of Egypt. But that did not happen right away. When Moses told Pharaoh to let his people go, Pharaoh replied by making things even worse for the Israelites. If everything was nice for the Israelites in Egypt, they would never have wanted to leave and go to the Promised Land. God used those difficult times to lead the Israelites to hate Egypt and be eager to leave. In the same way, God is using the sorrow, sadness and sickness of this world to lead us – when it is time – to be willing, even eager to let go of life on this earth and go to the Promised Land of heaven. We don't really want to spend eternity in this messed up world, do we?

Jesus continued by explaining that before Judgment Day came, his followers, the Christians, would suffer. Some would be arrested and tortured. Others would be thrown into prison. Others would be put on trial for their faith in Christ. Others would have their own families and friends turn on them. Still others would be executed. Some were burned at the stake and others fed to the lions. Eleven of the twelve apostles were executed. During the 300 years after the apostles, many Christians were arrested, tortured and killed. When Martin Luther and the other Confessors proclaimed what the Bible said, they were put on trial and lived in danger. A few hundred years later, some governments ordered churches to teach things that were not in the Bible. Thousands upon thousands of people left their family, fortunes and farms behind to move to America and carve out a new life and start new churches here.

Persecution of Christians continues today as well. It's not just happening in other places around the world, such as in North Korea, China, Nigeria, Sudan. Persecution of Christians and hostility to God's Word is happening right here in our country. This is not a political issue. It's a moral and spiritual issue. First we were told, "Don't ask, don't tell," in regards to people's sexual preferences. Just ignore it. Then we were told that those with different sexual preferences than us are just as moral as us. There is no right or wrong. Now, if we share what we believe or simply quote the Bible when it comes

to sexuality, we can be attacked and sued. All of that is what is happening in many churches which call themselves Christian. We should not be surprised that it is happening in our society where schools teach children that we are just highly advanced apes and that morality is defined by whatever you feel like doing at the moment. What's shockingly sad is that true Christianity is even gone from many churches who claim to teach the Bible. Just like the Jews who looked very religious at the time of Jesus but rejected him, so many people today who quote the Bible are still rejecting Jesus. How sad.

If God did not tell us that he is still driving the bus, we would despair. Instead, we hear Jesus gently urging us to look to him who overcame the world. Jesus knows everything that is going on in this world. He does not just know it by watching from far away on his heavenly throne. Jesus came down into this world. He knows what it is like to suffer and struggle, to feel hungry and tired and fed up with things. He knows what it feels like to have people turn against you. He knows what it's like to be unfairly arrested and put on trial. He knows what it feels like to have family and friends turn on you. He knows what it's like to be forsaken by God, something you and I deserve for our sins, but something we do not need to fear. We do not need to fear Judgement Day because Jesus already endured the judgement that we deserved for our sins. Because of Jesus, you are declared not guilty in the sight of God.

When Jesus comes "to judge the living and the dead," you will be clothed in the perfect purity of Jesus' righteousness. You will enjoy the physical reality of eternal life with a new heaven and a new earth. That's what Jesus was talking about when he said (:18), "not a hair of your head will perish." Two verses earlier he said that some Christians would be executed for their faith in Christ and then he said that not a hair would be lost. He means that when we get into heaven, we'll have a new and glorified body that will be complete even to the last hair. Jesus says to you (John 16:33), "**In this world you will have trouble. But take heart, I have overcome the world.**" He removed sin and conquered death. You can trust him. He urges you to look to him and to stand firm.

As those who oppose Jesus continue to oppose us, there is also a temptation to fight back against them. If they shout at us, we'll shout back. If they post things on social media that insult us, we'll post things that insult them. If they come at us with a sword, we'll swing our sword at them. That will not solve anything, though, will it? And it most certainly won't lead them to see Jesus as a loving and forgiving Savior. We have to admit that many people think of Christians as angry, self-righteous hypocrites because many Christians have behaved that way. Jesus, forgive us for so often misrepresenting you to a dying world.

Instead of swinging a sword at those who do not know Jesus, we want to take up the Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. As Jesus shared with his disciples what things were going to be like before Judgement Day, he also told them that the end times would give his people wonderful opportunities (:13), "**you will bear testimony to me.**" When Christians are put on trial, either in a court room or in your daily lives, that is an opportunity to tell people about Jesus. Jesus does not yell at us to witness or threaten to punish us if we do not witness. He simply says that it is going to happen. Faith in your heart will spill out of your mouth.

Do not expect prison doors to open or fire to fall from heaven, as we hear about in today's Bible class. But when you tell people the good news of salvation through Jesus, the door to their hearts will open and their defenses will fall. The next time you have an opportunity to talk about religion, maybe simply say, "Jesus says you're worth dying for." See how they react. Or when someone complains about the way things are going in this world, maybe reply, "The world has always been a mess and it always will be. That's why I'm looking forward to a better world in the next life." See how they react. Instead of telling others what is wrong with them, tell what Jesus means to you and why you find such comfort in knowing that your guilt is gone and that your future is heavenly.

Meanwhile, do not be surprised when life gets a bit bumpy and stormy. Jesus told us such things would happen. During the summer I read through a series of books about Horatio Hornblower, a fictional British sailor in the early 1880's. In one of the books, his ship got hit by a hurricane. The waves were higher than the ship's deck. In order to keep from getting swamped and flipped over, they had to keep the ship perpendicular to the waves so the bow of the ship would cut through the waves and ride up and over the waves. Someone had to stay at the helm, that large steering wheel with spokes that steered the ship. But no one could stand on the deck without being swept away by the wind. So, the hero tied himself to the ship's mast, the large pole that holds up the sails. During a hurricane, they were not using any sails. If the sails are rolled up, the mast with its yardarms, or cross-beams, looks just like a cross. If you and I are going to stand firm in this ticking time bomb of a world, we can not rely on our own wisdom and will-power. Only when we are connected to the cross of Christ, can we survive the storm of God's judgement. Because Jesus grabbed hold of you, you can rest secure in his arms. You can stand firm here and eternally. Amen.