

*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 bet Jesus was really popular that day! Luke tells us that some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, and Jesus said, “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.”

Nobody wants to hear that. We would all like to live in our illusions that life will keep going on just the way it is now, but it does not.

I talked with my sister this week, her son is in Iraq, sitting in front of a computer terminal 14-16 hours a day in his duty in the army. It upsets her to have him there. But after telling me about Andy she said, “But I am really concerned about another boy from our church, I taught him in third grade Sunday School. Tomorrow he will

be heading into Fallujah, he is the top gunner on a Bradley Fighting Vehicle – the one whose head is sticking out the top.”

From third grade Sunday School to endangered in war – ten or twelve or fourteen years is all it takes – but no parent or Sunday school teacher wants to hear that. We like to think our children will always stay third grade innocent and third grade safe. But wars come and buildings fall down and sometimes we come face to face with our worst fears.

Today’s gospel reading is a catalogue of those worst fears – wars and insurrections. Earthquakes, famines and plagues, dreadful portents and great signs from heaven, arrest, persecution, prison. Betrayal by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends – even some being put to death. Jesus was telling his disciples, this is what you can expect.

So take a look at the world today – what do you see? Any wars? Any earthquakes, famines? Any talk of flu epidemics? Any families coming apart at the seams?

Yet Jesus says, “Beware that you are not led astray; many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he’ and ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them.”

So what are we to do? The story is told that Martin Luther was asked what he would do if he knew that the world was going to end tomorrow. He replied, “I would plant a tree.” The point being that until the end does come we keep on doing the day to day things to care for the world God has placed us in.

Like teaching third graders about Jesus. Then when war or divorce or hurricane or job loss comes to them they will know the Lord they can count on.

Jesus hinted at how much he can be counted on as he promised his disciples that in all these terrible things that will happen in this world that not a hair of your head will perish. Just a sentence after he told them, “They will put some of you to death.” He promised, “not a hair of your head will perish.”

Jesus is not talking of our physical welfare here, our safety – but the promise that nothing will ever be able to separate us from his love. Not wars, or famines or flu epidemics, not death, not the loss of loved ones, for his promise to you is as eternal as the life he was prepared for you.

This week you received a brochure from the Stewardship Committee. On the outside is the picture of a path through a garden – this picture. I cannot think of a greater contrast with our gospel reading than this picture of a tranquil garden, unless it would be the contrast between the turmoil in our hearts and lives and world and the peace we long for. It is an easy thing to think that when the world turns into a beautiful garden then I will be at peace, when that son or father or sister is home from Iraq then I can start to live again.

But Jesus knew his followers would not live lives that were tranquil gardens in this world – he never promised to change the world out there but knew that he could overcome the fears in here. In this picture four words are superimposed on the path – love, faith, peace, and joy. Inside the brochure are comments about each of these words. I'd like to spend a moment on each of them.

We begin with love. Before there is faith or hope or anything else in the Christian life there is the love of Jesus for you, for me, for everyone for whom he died. Greater than our sin, greater than our grief, greater than all else is this love. Jesus wanted for his followers to live in that love, to share this love. “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

For that soldier heading into battle and for you – what could matter more than being loved and loving?

From love comes faith. Knowing that God's love for you is greater than all else you believe in God, trust in God, turn to God in every crisis. All of Jesus' words about what happens in this world were to prepare us so that in every moment we might turn to God in faith. In the emergency room, on the side of the road, when a loved one dies we turn to God with the deepest sense of urgency. The brochure says, “When meaning eludes us and the skies darken, we turn to God for direction and purpose. That God is waiting, hearing, answering our prayers is a precious gift to us.

Peace. Jesus said to his disciples – “Peace I leave you, my peace I give to you, not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”

Can there be peace when bullets are flying? Peace when the boss is yelling, peace when the world is unraveling? The world says no – everything must change before there is peace. So we run to escape to a tranquil garden. But Jesus, on the night before he was to be crucified promised, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you.” It is the peace of knowing in whose hands you truly are, knowing that even if you are crushed you will not be lost – knowing that even if you should die not a hair on your head will perish. The peace of God which passes all understanding – God’s Spirit, Jesus’ Spirit in you.

The last word on the path is joy. The world offers its joy in escape – entertainment – drugs – sports. Escape. But it is not a lasting joy.

The joy God’s Spirit gives grows out of giving yourself in love. As the brochure says, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” These words are relationship words – how we respond to another.

Holding in, wrapping arms only around self – no joy will ever come in that. But opening arms and hands and life to others brings joy. Giving yourself as Christ has given himself brings joy.

Our Stewardship campaign is about giving money. Through your gifts you invest in Christ’s word of love and faith and peace and joy. You embrace God’s people here. You are generous. In generosity you are like Jesus.

In Loudonville Ohio someone gave the dollars that bought the material that my sister taught to a third grade boy. Thank God that they did. Amen.