

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, 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."

They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" And 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.

"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." Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

"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. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

*We Are a Community of Faith, not Fear*

Everyone who visits St. Mark's on the Hill for worship has commented to me that the church building is simply beautiful. The best of 1920's gothic revival architecture. Wonderful stained glass windows. Great stonework and craftsmanship to admire. The carved wood of the altar rail and the ambry invite us to admire the details of the artist's skill. Over the past 130+ years this community of faith has made it a priority to build and maintain a house of worship that reflects the holiness and beauty of God's kingdom.

This worshipping community also believes that music is a vital part of our praise and prayers offered up to God. The organ we enjoy is an excellent instrument, built by a talented artist. We hire a gifted musician, Nelda Clelland, who invites our spirits to soar as her fingers and feet send the air flying through the organ pipes. We enjoy the beautiful voices of the choir and soloists. We listen with bliss to the many musical gifts of Frank Owens.

The altar guild offers up spotless linens and polished silver each week for our common meal around the communion table. These beautiful vessels are symbols for us of the value we place of the simple bread and wine that we are about to share.

We are a church that does not shy away from outward and visible signs of the inward and invisible truth of how deeply God has transformed our lives through Christ. We look for ways to engage all of our senses in the practice of worship together so that we will be transported to the place where heaven and earth meet.

If you feel a love and an affinity for this place of worship, then you have an idea about how deeply Jesus' disciples felt for the temple in Jerusalem. Towards the end of Jesus' life, he began

to challenge the authorities and the practices of the temple. He despaired over the corruption that had taken root in the very practices meant to offer thanks and praise to God. Jesus and his disciples and all the Jewish people loved the temple, just as you love St. Mark's on the Hill. They spoke with passion about how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God. The temple was the place where heaven and earth came together and God dwelled in the holy of holies.

One day Jesus said to his disciples, "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."

Imagine your panic if someone predicted, "The days will come when not one stone of St. Mark's will be left upon another."

The panicked disciples ask, "Rabbi, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" The disciples want to know the details of Jesus' prediction about the temple so that they can be prepared; prepared to stop the destruction, or if they can't stop it, prepared to rebuild God's house.

When Luke's Gospel was written down, the temple had already been destroyed about ten years before. These words were heard by Jews who had already experienced the unthinkable demolition of the place where heaven and earth meet. Where was God going to live? How were they going to offer the appointed sacrifices? What would they do on the feast of Passover? How would they keep the covenant established by Moses?

Jesus offers his disciples and us some very good advice, "Do not be led astray... Do not be terrified... for I will give you words and wisdom." Jesus' disciples were experiencing persecution from the Romans and the painful separation of being expelled from their own Jewish community. The loss of the temple was only the beginning of the many losses that they would endure. Our normal response when our world becomes unglued and there seems to be no safe harbor is to hunker down, close ranks, and turn inward.

In the life of the faith community of St. Mark's on the Hill, there have been times when this place has felt unglued. There have been experiences of loss and fear and anger. Today we face the daunting challenges of repairing and maintaining our historic buildings that are not being attacked by Roman armies, but rather the ravages of time and weather. Do we panic? Is there a quick fix answer? Can we close ranks and prepare for every possibility that we will face? No, Jesus did not call us to be a community of fear. We are a community of faith.

Over the past two months, I have been privileged to be introduced to a people who have not turned inward, but rather have turned out to welcome friend and stranger. I have heard testimonies of how deeply your lives have been touched by the love of Christ present in this church. I have felt your love of worshipping together, singing and praying and feasting of the word of God, and being nourished by the body and blood of Christ. This is a community of commitment that is ready to witness to the world about the truth of the Gospel in our lives. This is a community of faith, and we know that Christ will call us into new ministry together and give us words to express the love of Christ, that is our salvation.

Today we are going to collect and bless our pledges of time, talent, and financial resources for the year 2008. Often, the invitation to pledge to the church is driven by fear and anxiety. The temple is going to be destroyed. The roof is falling in. The boiler is on its last legs. We need

your commitment or else something terrible will happen. Be afraid, close ranks, and shore up whatever is crumbling.

But we are not a community of fear. We are a community of faith. It is our faith that binds us together and makes us the church. Our faith invites us to commit our gifts to serve the God who has given us all that we have. Jesus tells his disciples in the gospel and he tells us that everything we do is an opportunity to witness to the love of God in our lives. Not just at St. Mark's, but in our homes, at work, in our neighborhoods, and around the world. This is *true* stewardship, when we witness to the abundant love of God with all that we do, with all that we have, all of the time. I am honored and excited to discover the ministry Christ is calling us to embark upon in 2008, may we be faithful stewards of the gifts we have been given. Amen.