

“Led Astray”

A sermon preached by

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*<sup>5</sup>When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, <sup>6</sup>“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.” <sup>7</sup>They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” <sup>8</sup>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.” <sup>9</sup>“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.” <sup>10</sup>Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; <sup>11</sup>there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. <sup>12</sup>“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. <sup>13</sup>This will give you an opportunity to testify. <sup>14</sup>So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; <sup>15</sup>for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. <sup>16</sup>You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. <sup>17</sup>You will be hated by all because of my name. <sup>18</sup>But not a hair of your head will perish. <sup>19</sup>By your endurance you will gain your souls.*

In the last few years I’ve gathered with some friends and colleagues for a few days in late June at the Cenacle Retreat Center to map out and plan my preaching and our worship for the coming year. So in my planning last June, when I came to this morning’s lectionary passages, it didn’t occur to me that this would be the Sunday after the national election. Of course I couldn’t have predicted what a divisive and ugly election this would be. Nor could I have predicted that the election result would cause such elation for some and despair for others.

So when I selected the sermon title “Led Astray” it wasn’t intended to be a commentary on the election result. It was instead a title taken directly from Luke’s gospel, and I want to take some time this morning to look at that passage and examine its implications for our community.

Fred Craddock once described the apocalyptic texts in the New Testament in this playful way, “If you picture going through the New Testament as a walk down a street or road, you are in a well-lighted territory when you are in the Gospels and Acts. The road narrows and gets a little darker when you get into Paul over there. But when you get past Paul, the street is narrow. The houses are small and dimly lit—First John, Jude, Third John, Second Peter. And then at the

end of the road is that house of terrible splendor that we call the Apocalypse and we turn around and run back into the safe light!”<sup>1</sup>

Apocalyptic texts are different and sometimes intimidating. For the most part, these texts historically have played at the margins of the Christian canon. They remain suspect, like an oddball cousin who always says strange things in strange ways. Preachers are largely uncertain what to make of apocalyptic texts and for this reason approach them only occasionally and engage them with reservation.

They use large bombastic images, I think, mostly to get our attention, not to describe a reality. And the folks who try to interpret them literally are, I think, destined to miss the depths of what they have to offer. In this morning’s passage Jesus predicts the Jerusalem temple’s destruction as well as more general catastrophes that are preceded by an intense persecution of Christians.

But by the time Luke puts the finishing touches on these verses, the temple’s destruction has already happened. Luke’s Gospel is dated to about 85 ce, 15 years or so after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in 70 ce, which means that for Luke’s readers what Jesus says in this morning’s passage is more a reflection on the temple’s destruction than a prediction of it. Luke uses the destruction of this magnificent temple to make a statement on the impermanence of human achievement. In response to their wonder at the temple’s beauty, Jesus attempts to divert the attention of his audience from their fascination with “these things that you see.”

Discipleship hasn’t changed much in the last 2000 years. Following Jesus still means testifying to our trust in God in the midst of circumstances that test our confidence and our hope. So we keep going on, with endurance as a hallmark of what it means to be a believer. We will keep witnessing to the marvelous things that the Lord has done and will continue to do, regardless of the ways in which it looks otherwise. We just have to.

In her commentary on this passage, Karoline Lewis writes that what we see is what we have chosen to see. It is the true claim of the true hope we have in God -- our God who is still present and powerful when it looks like the church and our faith are powerless in the face of all that seems to be working against the realm of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Fred B. Craddock, "Reflections on an Early Christian Sermon: Form"

“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.” What things will we see? In our churches? In our denominations? In our nation? In our world? In one another? Because, what we see is to what we can testify -- to what we will give witness.

And what we see is what we will say. If you see women as objects, you will speak about them as objects. If you see African American people as those who matter less, you won't speak up for them. If you see the LGBTQ communities as aberrant, you will speak about them in a way that instills fear. If you see God as judge and jury, you will speak about others as deserving of condemnation. But the gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to a different vision, a vision of loving our enemy, and seeing them in this way we are called to speak about them as children of God.

In this way, our testimony and our witness give voice to what Jesus sees, whom God sees. God needs us to be the eyes of the Gospel when the world and those who have the loudest voices in it seem only to see the temples and towers and how they are adorned with beautiful stones.

It is awfully hard to testify to what others can't see. Perhaps that is, in part, the truth behind Jesus' visions, which sound hyperbolic at best, terrifying at worst. Yet, we are called to have a vision that can pierce through what seems to be beyond hope, to testify to the hope we have in God. We are called to have a vision that can perceive the activity of God when it looks as if that which is against God has the upper hand. We are called to have a vision that is intent on seeing what God sees and who God sees -- no matter what.

We gather today in the knowledge that some if not many of us are more fearful than we were a week ago. And if you are in a part of our society that now feels further on the margins, that fear is much more palpable that it is to an older white guy like me. In her letter this week to the Garrett-Evangelical community President Rector wrote, “During these days, we need to be gentle with each other, to comfort one another, and to be willing to ‘weep with those who weep.’ We stand with the prophet Amos who brought a word from the Lord calling us to ‘hate evil, love good, and establish justice at the city gate.’” Today regardless of our political persuasions, we ponder the implications of being part of such a divided nation. We grieve over a lack of unity and common purpose. We lament that the temples of our ideologies, our hopes, our visions that some of us believed were so beautifully constructed, now lie in ruins like the temple of old.

But the vision we are called to, the vision we claim, the people we are, have not and will not change. So what do I see, how can we resist being led astray? I see a faithful community who believe in the resurrected power of Jesus Christ. I see a gathering of disciples of Jesus. I see a people committed to one another, to God, to new and changed lives. I see a community dedicated to mercy, justice, and truth. And our commitment to our mission of invitation to all, of relationship with God, and of engagement with the world will not be changed...indeed it remains our calling. It is who we are, and who we will be. Thanks be to God. AMEN.