

## **LET NO ONE LEAD YOU ASTRAY II**

When writing a sermon, I utilize a list that's called the revised common lectionary. This is a list, composed by scholars, that gives the suggested biblical passages for each week. The passage listed for today is the one we have in front of us – Mark 13:1 – 8. Sometime right around Advent this passage is always on the lectionary. This passage has an apocalyptic flavor to it, and is usually preached that way. It seems to me that the scholars want us to receive the message – something new is about to happen. Things are going to be different than they were before. God is about to make all things new.

Today, however, I want to suggest a new interpretation. I want to suggest that there's a different way to look at this passage. I want to suggest that the disciples are wrongly focusing on things rather than on God.

Let's listen to the first part of this passage with fresh ears. As he came out of the Temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are to be accomplished?" Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am He!' And they will lead many astray."

I could go on and describe the signs of the apocalypse. Instead, I want to focus on this saying. "Beware that no one leads you astray." Because it seems to me that we are often in danger of being led astray. Often times we are in danger of being led astray in subtle ways. We could interpret this passage simply as a warning against the lure of cults, but, for most of us, we are in very little danger of being lured by a cult. We are, however, in constant danger of being tempted away from the kingdom – of being led astray from God's call. It isn't the obvious dangers that threaten to ensnare us, but the subtle ones.

Any way that you look at things I've been a pastor for more than a decade. During that time, I've been in contact with hundreds of churches and thousands of Christians. And one thing I can tell you with absolute certainty. Every person I have ever met is a sinner, and every church I have ever been in is full of sinners. We are all tempted to stray from the message of the kingdom. So we all have to be constantly on guard to see that we are not led astray.

I submit to you, that the biggest danger that the disciples faced on that hill that day, was not that they might identify a false Messiah and follow the wrong person. The biggest danger was that they might buy into the ways of the world and be led astray. That's also the biggest danger that faces us. We are often led astray by the ways of the world. We have to keep constant vigilance in order to prevent ourselves from being led astray by the world's false values, false ethics, and false morals.

As I was writing this sermon one incident from my history came back to haunt me. When I was pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, we received a grant of \$20,000 from a nonprofit foundation. We received that grant because one of our Elders sat on the board. He had the idea that we would redecorate our conference room with some of the money. He envisioned spending about \$5000, with the additional money being used for some other projects at the church, or perhaps for some benevolence. I suggested that we consider putting in a playground. However, as so often happens, the project grew. By the time it was presented to the Session, nearly all of the \$20,000 was spent to redecorate that one room. Unlike this church, in that church very little money was designated for benevolence of any sort. There was very little thought given to serving others.

Lest you think I'm being too hard on the members of First Presbyterian Church Jackson, I really don't blame them. The members of that congregation were good people. They were hard-working individuals, paid their taxes, and individually many of them gave their money and their time to others generously. They were good Christians-they loved Jesus Christ. But as a church I believe they had gone astray. I believe that they had bought in to a set of false values.

It's time, I think, that we begin to focus on the values of the Kingdom. I will let you in on a little secret. That's why I came to Jesus. It's also why I went into the ministry. I didn't come for the beauty of the worship service. I came because I needed to deepen relationship to Christ. I got into the church because I wanted to help people. I got into the church because I wanted to spread the love of Christ... to feed the hungry and clothe the naked... to preach a gospel of forgiveness... to make disciples. My biggest frustration is that I feel the church often gets sidetracked. We set those values aside to concentrate on other things.

If you want to know what I think is the secret to thriving as a church, I think it's for us to place those values at the center of our focus. I think every minute that we spend focusing on the things of the world, is a minute wasted. That's a minute we could have been doing something else.

We've just come through a very difficult time. We're coming out of a worldwide pandemic. We look at what has happened as a setback, or we can look at what happened as an opportunity. I think we should do the latter. After the first of the year, I want to begin a discipleship group here at Copeland. Ask yourself if you're satisfied with your relationship to Jesus Christ. If the answer is no, this group is for you.

Looking back at the text, it's important to realize that for the ancient Jewish people the Temple was the most important place in the world. The Temple was God's house – in a way that it never really has been for Christians. For us the church is God's house in a metaphorical sense. But the ancient Jews believed that God really lived there.

That in some way, a way that humans can't really understand, the Temple was a middle ground between two worlds: the natural and supernatural worlds. It was a portal between two dimensions. God dwelt there in order to have dominion over both worlds. If one wanted to meet God, then one went to the Temple, because that's where God was – literally. The trouble with that was that people began to revere the Temple rather than the God who lived there. They began to consider the Temple holy rather than the God who lived within it. So it's understandable that the disciples would talk about the beauty of the Temple.

Jesus, however, redirects their attention- towards himself. We Christians can find God anywhere because we believe God is everywhere. We don't need a Temple – we have the Holy Spirit. For us this is who God is – a God who is from everlasting to everlasting. Immortal. Omnipotent. Omnipresent. The building we happen to inhabit matters little. It's simply a home base from which we can conduct our mission as Jesus Christ's servants. We can find God wherever we are, because God is everywhere. However many people we happen to have, we can do God's mission, because we do so within the power of God himself. However much cash we have on and it will be enough to do whatever it is that God wants us to do. To me it isn't a question of what we have that's important, it's a question of what we do with what we have.

Over the next few months, I'm going to begin to ask some questions about our spirituality, and I will ask them often. I will ask questions like I just asked, “Are you satisfied with your relationship to Jesus Christ? Do you want a better relationship? Are you willing to put your faith on project status? Again, if the answer to any of these questions is yes, the discipleship group might be for you.

I have been here for nearly 15 years. I have gotten to know each and every one of you. Each one of you is special to me in your own way. I believe that each one of you is a servant of our Lord Jesus Christ. I believe, firmly, that each one of you has a purpose – a reason that God called you into being. That there is some purpose that God has for you, some cause that you were meant to serve. I can't tell you what the cause is, but I know that you have it, and I know that God gave you the gifts you need to fulfill it. God loves you. God has a plan for you. You are an important part of what God is doing in this world. I ask only that you allow me to help you seek that purpose. And I pray that God will continue to bless you as you develop a closer relationship with him and a greater life of Kingdom service.