

November 14, 2004

"Reading the Stones"

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13;; Luke 21:5-19

Preached by Rev. Dr. Richard E. Nye

#### COMMENTS

As I have anticipated the various components of our worship this morning I have found myself thinking about the ways in which our experience together deepens, nurtures and opens my heart to the reality of God. Music in worship is so powerfully important for me and I am sure for many of you. You will soon tire of me expressing gratefulness for our Colonial Chorale, our pipe organ, our instruments in the service of praising God. Our children's choir has lifted our spirits, bringing a new dimension to our worship. The combination of our children's presence and my awareness of the text of the Chorale's anthem, from I Corinthians 13 ("...the greatest of these is love.") during the offering, remind me of some children's views on love. I quickly share just a few of those views with you now: Manuel, age 8, says: "First you get shot with an arrow or something, but the rest of it isn't supposed to be so painful." Regina, age 10, states: "I'm not rushing into love. I'm finding fourth grade hard enough." And Greg, age 8, has timely advice: "Love is the most important thing in the world, but baseball is pretty good, too." (How true, especially if you are a Twins fan and a fan of this year's Cy Young Award winner, Twins pitcher, Johann Santana. It was a very good season! (Do I get an "amen" from Joan Metcalfe?)

Another moment during our worship of God that moves my heart to deeper places of awareness is the activity of remembering those who have been faithful and generous members of a church's life. As I shared with you last Sunday morning, my life is constantly nurtured by the memory of a host of faithful men and women who are no longer physically present with us in worship. But there is a wondrous connection, which I cherish and commend to you, between now and then for which we can be grateful. The moments of remembering Margaret and Homer Kinney have been quietly important to the business of this hour – the life-giving business of the worship of the living God.

#### LISTENING TO SCRIPTURE

Another element of our worship is listening for God's Word to us in the scripture readings. I try to be a "lectionary preacher." That is, I pay attention to the readings that are suggested for each given Sunday. No one tells me that I must go about the preaching task in this way. I have just discovered over the later half of my preaching life that this is a good discipline. Each Sunday we have a suggested Psalm, a reading from the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), a reading from one of the New Testament letters and a Gospel lesson. In these first weeks with you I have attempted to be attentive to the suggested readings from Luke's Gospel.

Using the lectionary is a good discipline for me, I have said. If it were left up to me to choose the texts I would read those passages that I find comfortable, that I am able to understand easily, that would not ruffle any congregational feathers, so to speak. If I did the choosing I most likely would never have chosen this morning's reading from Luke's 21<sup>st</sup> chapter. And, judging from the looks on some of your faces, as I was reading, you would have been just as happy if I had done the choosing.

But, several weeks ago I took a deep breath, came up with what I thought might be a clever title and trusted that God would help this preacher find those areas where God's truth and our human need intersect. It is always an adventure and this morning may demand more adventure-someness than usual.

Walk with me now into that first Century world where we find Jesus' friends acting like tourists in Jerusalem. They are observing the beloved temple described by a First Century historian, Josephus whose words are paraphrased by William Barclay: "In the Temple the pillars of the

porches and of the cloisters were columns of white marble, forty feet high, each made of one single block of stone. Of the ornaments, the most famous was the great vine made of solid gold, each of whose clusters was as tall as a (human person)..." (Barclay, "The Gospel of Luke, p. 258)

Overhear Jesus' Disciples as they discuss the Temple's magnificence, the gold leaf which reflected the morning sun, the size of the stones – "how did they ever get those stones from the quarry and how did they ever get them so perfectly in place?" we hear them comment. They were not thinking about the spiritual significance of this religious symbol of their faith tradition. They were simply awed by the architectural and engineering achievement of the structure. No doubt Jesus would have agreed with them. But, then we hear Jesus say, "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." (vss. 5 and 6).

#### READING THE STONES

Jesus had and has a wonderful capacity to take an ordinary, human moment and infuse it with spirit expanding meaning. Sometimes when I drive into Minneapolis or even more so into Chicago or at those times when I have stood in the shadows of those towering temples of commerce in New York City, I have felt much like those disciples – in awe of human achievement. I have read into those stone structures something about the brilliance and wonders of our human natures and capacities.

There is no reason to suggest that Jesus would demean human achievement. But he saw the ephemeral nature of our experience in this world. The Temple in all its magnificence that day could not be an end in itself, for Jesus knew something deeply true about human nature and the nature of our experience in this world. There is no permanence in anything of our human contriving. Jesus goes on to talk about the inevitability of wars and insurrections, of nation rising up against nation, of famines, and plagues, he talked about persecutions and trials for those who followed him...He was a realist, was he not!

Maybe this sermon title is not so obtuse, really. We talk about reading people, reading situations...For example, we might ask, "how do you read what is happening in the stock market?" Or, "How do you read the present political climate in Minnesota?" Or, "How do you read the choice of sermon titles?" What Jesus did in that otherwise ordinary moment was read the human condition and something deeply true about the ultimate nature of our tenure in this world.

So, I ask you, how do you read the way in which Jesus read the future of their world that day? I remind us all that these words of Jesus were remembered through the years after his death. I also ask us to remember that Luke did not write his Gospel until sometime between 80 and 90 – in other words some 50 plus years after that day we have attempted to share with Jesus and his closest friends on the outskirts of the Temple Mount. The Temple and all of Jerusalem have been cruelly destroyed by Roman armies. Thousands of Jewish citizens have been brutally murdered and according to some historic estimates almost a 100,000 inhabitants have been carried away. So Luke is remembering the things that were reported about what Jesus said that day regarding the inevitable future of human life in this world in the context of a painful, more recent memory of actually events in the Holy City of Jerusalem. (In light of this we can understand why interpreting Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21, not to mention the concluding book of our New Testaments, Revelations, is extremely challenging.)

#### THE END OF TIME AND JESUS SECOND COMING

It is clear that the Gospels describe a cataclysmic ending of life in this world. There are, also, clear allusions which Jesus makes about his return after his death. In the First Century as now there were diverse understandings about all of this. For instance, in our reading from

Thessalonians this morning we find the Apostle Paul chastising some of the members of the Christian community for their laziness excused by their belief that Jesus was coming any day, so why work or give any attention to the needs of one's family, not to mention the needs of the poor.

In our time there is the publishing phenomenon of the Left Behind series. Authored by LeHaye and Jenkins there are 12 volumes which are based on a particular understanding of Jesus' return and the end of time. I will not ask you to reveal your interest in the series, the latest of which is titled, "The Glorious Appearing." But some number of you have probably read or are reading this series, since there are well over 60 million volumes in circulation. (Way outselling best selling authors like Grishom, King and others...) This series is based on a particular interpretation of scripture which is the brainchild of a renegade Anglican priest by the name of John Nelson Darby who spent a large part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century preaching something called "premillennial dispensationalism." According to Darby, human history is divided up into seven ages, or dispensations, all leading up to the end of time. We live under the "dispensation of grace," when people are judged according to their personal relationship with Jesus Christ, but between now and the "dispensation of the millennial kingdom," things are going to get ugly.

As the seventh dispensation dawns God's elect will be raptured into glory, leaving behind those who were not spiritually advanced enough to be taken but who are the faithful remnant. This remnant will engage satanic forces in a bloody, decisive battle at Armageddon. That battle will be won by Christ's mighty forces and there will be a thousand years of peace under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

#### CONCLUSIONS

I come from engagement with this morning's Gospel reading and my partial acquaintance with various theological understandings with a particular reading that stirs my heart and informs my attempt to live as a follower of Jesus.

For one thing, I am less stirred by the idea of a climactic return and deeply moved by the thought that Jesus comes again and again. ("Realized eschatology, C.H. Dodd, New Testament scholar from the first half of last century...")

In my office at Hinsdale I had several bulletin boards. There was one just to the right of my desk which had a button reading, "Jesus is coming! Look busy!" I take this to be good advice and authentically biblical, consistent with the meaning of Jesus' life for me.

Listen to Barbara Brown Taylor in a September issue of Christian Century magazine. She says, "Matter where Jesus is, it is time to stop living in the past and in the future and to start living right now, because whenever the end comes, that is when it will come-in the now-and meanwhile, our best chance at discovering what abundant life is all about is to start living into it right now, not only one by one but also all together."

For a second thing, living up against an awareness of life's ending, not necessarily the kind of dramatic conclusive ending of all creation, but the undeniable reality of our own slipping from conscious life, is informing.

You and I are called to live with a sense of stewardship. This has to do with our participation in the church, yes. But not only that. Stewardship is a matter of accountability before God's intentions for us. One of the biggest hindrances to faithful stewardship is our chronic failure to see our present lives through the lenses of eternity.

Martin Luther, the 16<sup>th</sup> Century reformer, said he had only two days on his calendar: Today and That Day (the day of reckoning). Here is a little suggestion for us: Write "today" and "That Day"

on cards and place them in strategic places-your calendar, your wallet, your car visor, your desk, etc...

As you go about your daily routines, as you make moment by moment choices concerning your money and possessions, as you engage in relationships, as you expend time and energy, continually come back to the questions: Am I investing today in light of that day. Finally, I simply remind you that at the end of our Bibles the New Testament book, Revelation, ends not with a battle but with a benediction. "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen!"