

“The Idols We Create”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – November 14, 2021

Mark 13:1-8

In Ashtabula, there were four Presbyterian Churches all within two miles of each other. Many years ago, walking to church was the thing to do. So, churches never needed large parking lots and they just needed to be close to the members in the neighborhood. Churches back then were, indeed, neighborhood churches. Only one church was needed per neighborhood, and everyone belonged to that church.

These four Presbyterian churches over time needed to change. People started driving in from longer and longer distances. The fact that they were on each other's doorsteps made it very tough to continue. Finally, two of churches merged into one church. They became stronger because of the merger, but still to this day suffer with the image that they really are three churches, one church from Church A, another from Church B and the third as the united Churches A and B. They have survived and somehow even thrived in the ministry to the west end of the town.

The other two have had their ups and down and are now in the downs. They are struggling and they are finding new ways to minister. But now the church that went through the merger and the far east side church are talking about sharing a pastor to cut costs and to continue to survive. The middle church is sharing a pastor with another Presbyterian church seven miles down the road in another town. In their prime, each of these churches were well over 500 members each. Now they struggle to survive.

While I was there, I tried to get all three churches to combine into one large church. The sharing income, the increase of people, the new opportunities for ministry would have created a large and thriving church that would be strong and animated. But the reply was always the same, “That would be great, but they would have to come here, we are not going there.” Why not? “Because we love our building, and we are comfortable here. We have all the say if you come here. We have already named all the rooms, and have names on all the pews, and we say who can do what, when and how.”

It reminds me of another church. We are told that Psalm 121 was written from the anticipation that was sung by Jewish pilgrims when they first caught sight of the temple towering 200 feet over the ancient city of Jerusalem. They began to sing:

“I lift my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”

The temple symbolized God’s presence. They literally believed that this was indeed “God’s house,” and that this was where God lived.

Unfortunately, this temple was totally destroyed in 70 AD by Titus and his Roman Army. Rome’s siege of Jerusalem throughout that year was extremely harsh and cruel. In his history, THE WARS OF THE JEWS, Josephus states that over one million inhabitants of the city died.

The only part of the temple left by Titus was a portion of the Western Wall. Compared to the rest of the temple complex, this was just a small piece of real estate measuring 50 yards long and 60 feet high. Historians claim that General Titus preserved this much of the wall to show the formidable power of his military machine.

Is it any wonder that Jews today congregate in front of the wall to wail the loss of their temple? They pray. They write prayer request on pieces of paper and place them in between the stones.

In our Gospel reading today, as Jesus and the disciples came out of the temple one of his disciples said to Jesus, “LOOK, TEACHER, WHAT LARGE STONES AND WHAT LARGE BUILDINGS!” And Jesus asked him, “DO YOU SEE THESE GREAT BUILDINGS? NOT ONE STONE WILL BE LEFT HERE UPON ANOTHER, ALL WILL BE THROWN DOWN.”

What a chilling prophecy of the destruction that would come in 70 AD! Like so many others, the disciples were quite impressed with the temple complex and commented about that to Jesus. His response must have been shocking! How inconceivable to even imagine that this temple could be destroyed. Jesus obviously was not impressed with the physical beauty of the temple and was concerned about the spiritual emptiness within the temple.

This entire scenario highlights an ongoing challenge to all of us who are followers of Jesus Christ. Part of the challenge is to realize that what is written in the scriptures is for a reason. That God wants us to focus on him and believe

in what he is telling us. The disciples probably did not believe that the temple would be destroyed, but what happened in 70 AD?

While the first challenge is for us to believe what God is telling us is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. The second challenge is to not let “good things” become “ends” in themselves. For example:

The bible can be a detriment and an “end” in itself when we treat it only as part of the decorating décor on the coffee table. If we never read it and draw closer to the God it reveals, then the bible has become a subtle idol that keeps us at arm’s length from the God we intend to worship and serve.

Another example: A church building where the people of God can gather for worship, study, and fellowship can be a real blessing. Unfortunately, sometimes the building itself becomes “a sacred cow” and “end” in itself. And like the ancient people of God, we become so building orientated that we lose sight of the God whom we worship.

There is a parable called the lifesaving station. I am not sure who the author is, but this is how I recall the story:

On a dangerous seacoast, where shipwrecks often occurred, there was once a crude, little lifesaving station. The building was just a hut and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea. With no thought for themselves, they went out day or night tirelessly searching for the lost. Many lives were saved by this little station so that it became famous. Some of those who have been saved and others from the area wanted to become associated with the station and gave of their time and money. But others came and wanted to change the atmosphere of the station. They wanted it to be a social event where they could gather and enjoy each other’s company. Pretty soon, they rebuilt the lifesaving station into a beautiful station with a fleet of boats and a dance area, special rooms for the prominent and some for the less prominent. There was mandatory giving of dues to belong to such a prestigious place. And they lost sight of what they were all about. Then came along a retired coast guard officer who was invited to join the club. But he had other ideas and taught a few the survival techniques that were lost on how to save lives once again. He foretold of the doom of the lifesaving country club, and few believed.

And one day a ship found itself in trouble on the sea. The country club would not send out its fleet. The members would not race to the rescue. The officers

would not leave the party. And the ship and the crew were lost. That was the last party of the county club. The coast guard closed down the club and dispersed the property. Thus, the prophecy of the coast guard officer was fulfilled. And very few lives were ever lost there again. A few devoted members keep a constant watch over the sea. With no thought for themselves, they went out day or night tirelessly searching of the lost.

Here is a lesson for us today. We have witnessed the temple's destruction in 70 AD, and we too can fall into the same trap if we forget what we are about and why we have gathered. The prophecies are true, and they also can apply to us as well. The church, the Presbytery, the denomination, the Christian faith is not immune to the prophecy. May we continue to believe in the God that we worship and continue to be the lifesaving station that saves the lives of others, without thought for ourselves. Amen.