

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

November 13, 2016

Pledge Sunday  
Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 98

Luke 21:5-19

If you've had a chance to peruse the bulletin and look ahead, you'll see that after the sermon, we'll be singing *Joy to the World*.

*Joy to the World* wasn't originally composed for Christmas but was part of hymn writer Isaac Watts' attempt to translate, and set to new music, the Psalms for Christian worship. Watts' inspiration for this hymn was Psalm 98, the Psalm assigned for this day. He actually wrote it to celebrate Christ's second coming, rather than his first, keeping with the apocalyptic theme of today's Gospel.

So what do we make of the apocalyptic themes and imagery in our reading from Luke? Popular religious culture has taught us to think of apocalyptic passages as predictions – if not an outright road map – of the end times; but that's not how this would have been heard back then.

Back then, a reading like this would have helped believers, who were oppressed and persecuted, put their struggles into the larger context of the universal struggle between God and the forces of evil. In this way, these words provided comfort that no matter how difficult things became, God would not abandon them, and that God would ultimately prevail. And this was a great encouragement for believers to persevere and even to witness to Christ in times of persecution.

But what is hard for us about this reading from Luke is not the dire circumstances he anticipates; but rather the fact that the conditions Jesus describes – the intense persecution of believers – are actually unfamiliar to us. We know that there are Christians who are being persecuted for their faith today and they need our prayers and support, but that's not us.

Our challenge is nearly the opposite. Our culture isn't hostile to the Christian faith; it's indifferent to it. Where once we had the support of a culture that actively encouraged church participation, that support is virtually non-existent today. There are now so many options for how we can spend our Sunday mornings, and so many other narratives to which we can look for meaning, that going to Church and making our faith a priority is a challenge for many and a sacrifice for most.

Which is why our presence here, and even more our tangible pledge to support and further the work of our church whose prime directive is to share Christ and change lives, is so important and is itself a powerful witness.

Which is also why I think singing *Joy to the World* is the exact right hymn to sing today. Whereas apocalyptic passages like today's are often misused to try to predict the future, Psalm 98 – and *Joy to the World* – remind us that God is active in the world now, that there is evidence of God's majesty and goodness all around us.

And because this is true – we can live with confidence and assurance even amid the tough times. We know who has the last word. Through it all, God works, sustains, continues to create, and work out His purposes “By holding fast, you will gain your lives” (21:19 CEB)

Jesus wasn't just warning us that tough times were ahead for those who follow him – he dared to say that even a disaster such as this (Temple being destroyed) was a time to look for God in, through, and in spite of the disaster.

Now, the Temple was built to last a thousand years; and the stability and permanence of the Temple reassured people of the eternal nature of God. This will all be destroyed? they must have wondered. If even the Temple can pass away, what then is safe from destruction?

Notice that Jesus doesn't say that God will dismantle the Temple or cause the disaster. But he does claim that even a national disaster can be an opportunity to look up, to stand on tiptoes for a good look at what God is doing among us. A time of terror and sorrow can be, by God's grace, a time of redemption.

The present is not as permanent as it may seem, Jesus is saying. "Look up," read the signs of the times. What the world sees as disaster, disciples are conditioned to read as possible redemption.

Someone who is really good at this is our own Bert Tompkins

3+ years ago health declined - Diagnosis trajectory of decline .....

Opportunity to work hard in his recovery - which he did - without despairing

Even more inspiring was his discovery of God's close presence with him

Misdiagnosed! Treated and improved!

Until...2 months ago - turn for the worse - after hospitalizations and blood transfusions...

Now stabilized - home - but with a good amount of in-home care.

And again he works hard at the simple tasks of walking and eating, never giving up

And he is ready to go home - home home.

His spirits are good!

And you know what his favorite Bible verse is? It's from Psalm 98!! *The mountains will sing and the rivers will clap their hands with joy.*

Jesus expects us to be his disciple even in our shattered, painful times.

And the reason Bert or anyone of us can stand confidently amid the destruction of our Temples is because of another truth that the choir will sing about during the offering.

The words of their anthem, *I Am Not My Own*, were written in 1563 and are the answer to the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism. Catechisms are like little curriculums for the Christian faith, written in question and answer form.

#### **Heidelberg Q1 - What is your only comfort in life and in death?**

A. That I am not my own,

but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—

to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood,

and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.

He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head

(a reference to our reading from Luke today)

without the will of my Father in heaven;

in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.

Because I belong to him,

Christ, by his Holy Spirit,

assures me of eternal life

and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready

from now on to live for him.

Bernard chose this anthem in Sept., and then we looked at the calendar together to figure out which Sunday it would go on. We landed on today - Pledge Sunday - and while at the time, I didn't see an obvious "pledge Sunday connection," it still seemed like the best Sunday to sing it.

And then we arrived at this week. And as I have pondered what the church's testimony is in light of the growing tensions following the presidential election, I read again Q1 from the Heidelberg Catechism, and realized that this is EXACTLY the right message for this Sunday!

Because I believe that no matter what your political preferences are, we are to hold our identity as Christians even higher. No matter who the president is, Christ is our Lord. President Obama is not our Lord, President Trump won't be our Lord. Jesus Christ is.

And as the church we are to make pointing to Christ our highest priority. This means a number of things. (T. Scott Daniels) The church pointing to Christ as Lord means:

- No matter what good or bad decisions leaders or nations make, the Church believes that Christ will not stop until all creation has been redeemed.
- The global Body of Christ exists within many nations. And so Christians have citizenship responsibilities and obligations wherever we may be located. But our ultimate allegiance has been pledged to Christ and to his kingdom.
- A nation and its leader may place a ban on refugees entering a country, but the Church will always welcome the stranger and believe hospitality is what divides the sheep nations from the goat nations (Matt 25).
- A nation and its leader may work to create various systems of health care and welfare, but the Church will always feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and bring healing to the wounded.
- A nation and its leader may declare war on opposing countries and forces, but the Church will always love enemies and work at overcoming evil with good.
- A nation and its leader may work at protecting and solidifying the somewhat historically arbitrary boundaries drawn between countries, but the Church will always live as though we are all one in Christ Jesus.
- A nation and its leader may legislate various practices pertaining to birth, death, and judgment, but the Church will always value and honor life as a sacred gift. And it will view the goal of justice as reconciliation and not just retribution.

Wherever we may be politically, we come together on Sunday to give thanks for God's love for the world – the whole world – Republicans, Democrats, Independents, rich, poor, women, men, young, old, persons of all races and ethnicities. God loves us all.

And we are united not by gender or race or economic status or political affiliation but rather by Christ and our belief that God created all things and people, sustains all things and people, and will redeem all things and people, all because of God's overwhelming love for all things and people.

*Hamilton: The Musical* is the story of U.S. Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton and Vice President Aaron Burr. Throughout the play, the two men are held up as opposites. Hamilton is "non-stop"— full of energy, always working. His friends say he writes "like he's running out of time."

Burr is the opposite. Hamilton often chides him for his lack of focus: "If you stand for nothing, Burr, what'll you fall for?" He is patient, waiting to make a move, not wanting to make any mistakes.

I think we all probably have a bit of both Hamilton and Burr in us. There are times when we rush ahead and other times when we cautiously wait. I certainly don't think one way is right and the other wrong; it seems like a balance is good. Well today, Jesus tells us that when hard times come, we need to "hold fast." And we can do that while either charging ahead or holding still.

When we root ourselves deeply in God, we know our source, that we belong to our Lord Jesus. (Caela Simmons Wood)

And belonging to our Lord Jesus, coming together as the body of Christ here in this church, we have the opportunity to share Christ by being joyful. Friedrich Nietzsche, son and grandson of Lutheran pastors who became a harsh critic of the Christian faith in the late nineteenth century – once said that he

rejected Christianity in part because so **few of its adherents demonstrated the resurrection joy it claimed.**

So perhaps our response to the exhaustion of this year's political season,  
the uncertainty of a sluggish economy,  
concerns for an endangered environment,  
and a host of other things afflicting us  
might be to sing words of joy, thanksgiving, and praise.

For God is still at work –  
both in us and through us  
as individuals and as the church  
for the health of this world which God loves so much.

We don't know what tomorrow holds for us,  
But we do know who holds tomorrow.

Amen.