

The Third Last Sunday of the Church Year  
Matthew 24:15-28

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*“When you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand)...” (v. 15)*

What comes to your mind when I say, “9/11?”

I bet you remember that day vividly like I do. I don't know anyone personally who was there in New York, but the horror of the tragedy still sticks with me. I bet it has stuck with you too. For some it may even be a visceral reaction when you hear about it. When Jesus says, “when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel,” His hearers would have had an even stronger reaction than we do when we hear “9/11.”

The abomination of desolation that the Prophet Daniel prophesied happened in the second century B.C. Antiochus IV took over Jerusalem in 175 B.C. and attempted to replace the Israelite worship in the one true God. He outlawed temple worship and is even reported to have sacrificed a pig on the altar! He tried to replace worship at the temple with worship to Zeus and he tried to replace their culture with a proliferation of Greek gymnasiums. This led to the Maccabean revolt where true temple worship was restored. The rededication of the temple is known as the Feast of Dedication which we see Jesus attend in John 10. You might know it better as Hanukkah.

What made Antiochus IV's actions the abomination of desolation?

It has to do with the concept of holiness. A holy God cannot come into contact with an unholy, sinful people. The people of God understood this. When Moses delivers the ten commandments and the people see the power of God in the mountain, they say to Moses: "You speak to us, lest we die." (Exodus 20:18-19) They understand on a visceral level that sinful people will die when they come in contact with a holy God. God must make a way to be present with us, His sinful people. He makes that way through blood. The blood of animals atone for sin and teach the people about the Christ who is to come and be the perfect and final sacrifice.

Antiochus takes the blood sacrifices away, institutes a statue to Zeus, and gives himself the name Epiphanes which means god made manifest. He blasphemes God in His own temple. He desecrates the Holy of Holies. He makes himself to be the manifestation of God. This horrendous event is in the memory of the disciples. I wonder if they shudder when Jesus mentions it?

Jesus is warning His listeners of two future events with the reminder of what Antiochus IV did.

One is the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70 by the Roman general Titus. He destroys the temple so that not one stone is left upon another as Jesus predicts. The suffering of the people stuck in Jerusalem was horrendous. Even though most of Jerusalem rejects Jesus as the Messiah, He warns them so that they might flee when they see the Romans coming and escape a horrendous death. God's righteous judgment reigns down on Jerusalem and He destroys the sacrificial system forever. We know it's because Jesus' sacrifice is the true sacrifice that atones for sin and no other sacrifices are

needed. But I believe Jesus also warns His hearers and readers so that those who are alive might hear the account of the temples' destruction, repent, and believe in Jesus as the Messiah. This answers the immediate question of the disciples about when the temple will be destroyed. But Jesus also includes it in the answer about when the end of the ages will come. Jesus is also warning about an abomination of desolation which signals His return.

How do we see the abomination of desolation today?

The presence of God for His people shifts from the temple to the church with the death and resurrection of Christ. The kingdom of God is no longer located on a mountain in Jerusalem. It is now located where the Word of God is taught in its purity and the Sacraments are administered rightly. It is no longer located at the one temple in Jerusalem but in churches throughout the world! That means that now the abomination of desolation will happen in the church. It is a sign of the end times, but before we look at that, let's look at the other signs Jesus lists as signs of the end times:

Jesus says, "many will come in my name, saying 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray" (v. 5) This has happened many, many times. Jim Jones, Charles Mason, and David Koresh are a few names you might recognize. They either directly claimed to be a reincarnation of Christ or allowed that perception to spread by their followers.

Jesus says "you will hear of wars and rumors of wars." (v. 6) This has been going on after Jesus' words, at least, since A.D. 70. It continues to happen and will continue until Jesus returns in glory.

Jesus says, “nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom.” (v. 7) If WWI and WWII won’t convince you that this has happened already, I don’t know what would convince you that these words have been fulfilled!

Jesus says, “there will be famines and earthquakes in various places.” (v. 7) Famines and earthquakes have happened all over the world many times since the warning of our Lord. I’m sure many of you remember Mount St. Helen’s erupting in 1980.

Let’s return to the other main sign of the abomination of desolation. Has this happened? I don’t want you to just take my word for it. Listen to what C.F.W. Walther says in a sermon in the later half of the 1800’s:

“The person who regards the present as the horrible end times is thought to be greatly mistaken. But appearances can be deceiving. The cry of ‘Here is Christ! There is Christ!’ that resounds from so many pulpits is precisely what makes our age so dangerous and abominable, and it demonstrates that the final, evil days of the world are approaching. For it is mostly a false Christ who is now being preached and praised in order to deceive even the elect. There are now many preachers and laity, both learned and unlearned individuals, who no longer believe the Bible is God’s Word and faith in Christ is the only way to salvation. With their own imagined virtue and good works, they believe that they have made God their debtor, that He must rightfully receive them into heaven after their death, and that He must eternally reward them. They do not want to think of themselves as sinners who are in need of a Savior. The Word of the cross is foolishness and a stumbling block to them” (Treasury of Daily Prayer, pg. 889)

It has only gotten worse, I'm afraid. The last days are truly upon us!  
Thanks be to God He still preserves His Word and Sacraments in many churches!

But that doesn't mean we know when Christ will come in glory. Later in Matthew 24, Jesus says that "No one knows [that day and hour], not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only." (Matthew 24:36) And Jesus talks two ways about our perception of the tribulation that is here and still coming. One way Jesus talks about this tribulation is to compare it to knowing when a fig tree indicates that summer is coming. Its branches become tender and it starts to bud and you know that summer is right around the corner. (Matthew 24:32-33) It seems from this that when the tribulation is bad enough, we should know that Christ is coming immediately. But another way Jesus talks about His coming again is by comparing our last days to the days of Noah. Life was going on as normal while Noah was building the ark, but it ended quickly when the flood waters came. (Matthew 24:37-44) It seems from this that we might not know when Jesus' coming back is right around the corner.

I believe this is what we can safely say from God's Word: We are in the end times, Jesus is coming soon, and that tribulation will continue and get worse until He does return in glory.

Jesus warns us so that we are ready, "for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." (Matthew 24:44) The Old Testament reading today is a great example of why we need to be warned. (Exodus 32) God's chosen people were rescued from slavery in Egypt. They had seen God's awesome ten plagues. They walked across the Red Sea on dry land and watched the armies of Pharaoh drown in that same sea.

God provided for them in the wilderness. Yet, when they thought Moses spent too much time on the mountain with God, they worshiped a golden calf. Many fell away from the faith that day. Some, like Aaron, were restored through the intercession of Moses, but many remained condemned forever. God doesn't want you to fall away from the faith through false teachers or through suffering tribulation.

I also believe Jesus is encouraging you to cling to Him through the tribulation that is here and the more tribulation that is to come. Think of marriage. I think it's much better for you, and for your marriage, when you know that there will be tough times. And also when you know that you can make it through them successfully. How many quit their marriages when they just start getting tough! Being a Christian is like being married. It's got some great times, but it isn't easy. Jesus wants you to know that there will be tough times. And He wants you to know that you can make it through them by His grace. And unlike marriage, where you place your trust in a fallible human being, Jesus promises that He is "with you always, to the end of the age," in the last verse of Matthew!

Sadly, there will be more days like "9/11." Those kinds of days impress upon us the horrible consequences of sin and give us opportunity to repent of our own sin. They also remind us that our Lord is coming soon to rescue us from this vale of tears. Continue to place your trust in Him.

In Jesus' name. Amen.