

“Your Opportunity to Witness”

Isaiah 65:17-25, 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5 or 13, Luke 21:5-19

November 13, 2016

In 1931, the Empire State Building in New York City became the tallest building ever built in the history of the world; some 1250 feet tall, standing some 102 stories high! The Empire State Building would keep that claim to fame for the next 43 years, until The Sears Tower was completed in Chicago in 1974; rising some 201 feet taller than the Empire State Building—and some 108 stories high! In 1998, there was yet an even taller building constructed in Malaysia in southeastern Asia, only to be surpassed six years later, in 2004, by an even taller building successfully constructed in Taipei, Taiwan named the Taipei 101.” If the information I accessed this past week is still accurate, the tallest building in the world today— was completed in 2010 in Dubai, the Capital City of the United Arab Emirates; named the BURG KAHLIFA reaching some 2717 feet high, consisting of 163 stories; over twice as tall as the Empire State Building.

Brothers and sisters, let’s face it: There is just something about the construction of a massive building—that fully captures our human imaginations. And isn’t this even a great truth that confronts us already in the opening chapters of the Bible, when we read in Genesis 11 about those people who were living out there on the Plains of Shinar – who made it their chief ambition to build a tower that would shoot up very high into the heavens!

Yet their motivation behind constructing this enormous tower—was not in any way to glorify their Creator or to serve the greater needs of humanity as a whole! No—they freely admitted it: They were building this tower all in the hopes of making a name for themselves! They said, *“Come let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heaven, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth”* (Genesis 11:4)!

Perhaps in their construction of this magnificent city and its skyscraper tower they were at least trying to project their own image of GREATNESS on the rest of the world. Maybe there was even a psychology of INTIMIDATION involved. But the LORD GOD almighty was not impressed with their ambition—so somewhere along the way in that whole construction process, God said: *“Behold, they are one people and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing they propose will be impossible for them!”* The LORD GOD could certainly look into the hearts of these people and see that their intentions were only evil—so he said to the hosts of heaven: *“Come, let us go down there and confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech!”*

We all need to remember that there is a great deal of difference between the acquisition of KNOWLEDGE and the acquisition of WISDOM. Knowledge consists of the acquisition of facts, information and skills gained by a person through their experience or education. But wisdom is having enough intelligence, judgment and prudence—to use that knowledge in a way that is helpful and beneficial to ourselves and to other people, rather than using that knowledge for evil purposes, by which we might hurt and harm ourselves and other people!

In this story of The Tower of Babel, God is reminding us that there are times—when everyone of us can become too smart for our own good, and there are times, to use another old cliché when we can become “too big for our own britches.”

The people who were living out there on the Plains of Shinar, at that time, could not confess with the psalmist: *“Serve the Lord with gladness! Come into his presence with singing! Know that the LORD, he is God! It is he who had made us and not we, ourselves! We are his people and the sheep of his pasture”* (Psalm 100:2-3)

The people who were out there living on the Plains of Shinar at that time could not sing the words of that great hymn: “All depends on our possessing, God’s abundant grace and blessing,

though all earthly wealth depart! They who trust with faith unshaken, by their God are not forsaken and will keep a dauntless heart!" (LSB 732:1)

When we first encounter Jesus and his disciples in the words of our Gospel lesson today, these initial words of the disciples were certainly not spoken with any kind exaggerated sense of self-importance on their part or in any sort of malicious way!

Like so many Passover pilgrims who made it into the city streets of Jerusalem to celebrate the FEAST OF THE PASSOVER there that year, this was to a large degree also why Jesus' disciples had entered the city of Jerusalem with him. But this event is taking place in the middle of that first Holy Week. Just two or three days before this—Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem—on great Palm Sunday ride.

On Monday he had cleansed the temple of its moneychangers, who in Jesus' words were guilty of taking God his Father's House of Prayer and turning it into a den of thieves. On Tuesday and Wednesday, members of the religious establishment provoked Jesus into many debates—each of which he handsomely won!

These were probably harmless comments that Jesus' disciples made when they began speaking of the temple and how it was adorned by stones and offerings, Luke tells us. St. Mark tells us also that on that particular day one of Jesus disciples spoke up and said to him in presence of everyone else: *'Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!'* (Mark 13:1)!

And certainly these disciples of Jesus were not exaggerating! The temple was considered to be one of the great wonders of the Roman World, not unlike the Empire State Building or The Sears Tower for us in our day; a magnificent structure indeed!

Its spectacular location on Mount Moriah gave it an imposing dominance over ancient Jerusalem. From a distance, the Jewish historian Josephus tells us that the temple: "Looked like a mountain of gold, because of its nine massive gates studded with jewels and because much of its exterior walls were plated with gold and silver!

The temple's foundation stones were certainly massive too—the size of the boxcars of a train that you might still see rolling down the railroads tracks if you are stopped in your car behind a Railroad Crossing on your way home from this worship service this morning!

The temple was indeed wonderful, but if the disciples were hoping to raise Jesus' spirits by their admiration, they failed. Jesus' response, no doubt, left them flabbergasted: *"As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down"* (v. 6).

In the words of this Gospel lesson this morning—Jesus was reminding his disciples and we who are his disciples yet today that this whole world and everything in it is always only TEMPORAL at best!

When the disciples of Jesus pressed him to give to them the actual date when that GREAT AND LAST DAY of the LORD would arrive, Jesus did not answer that question. But he does give to them and to us the sobering reminder once again that this world as we presently know it will one day come to an end.

Brothers and sisters, in both our Old Testament and Gospel lessons today—we can see a very important truth about Biblical prophecy that many people may never have come to realize as being true—and this that when Biblical prophecies are revealed to us in the Bible—that so often they have a twofold implication—an implication already for the people living in that time and place—when the prophecy was first given—but also an implication for promised hope that God gives to us as his people that we may one day live with him in heaven!

What some people may never realize is that the Old Testament speaks to us of heaven too! Did you listen to the words of the prophet in our Old Testament lesson today? Through him God says, *"For behold, I will create a new heaven and a new earth and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy and her people to be a gladness!"*

Friends, these words of our Old Testament lesson this morning were spoken to the Jewish people who had just returned to Jerusalem from their 70 years of exile in Babylon in 539 BC; that land to which they had been carted off by Nebuchadnezzar, where they, their parents and their grandparents had been held as political exiles against their will. When the Jewish exiles returned to the city of Jerusalem in 539 BC, **THE CONDITIONS THEY FOUND THERE WERE MOST DISCOURAGING!** They were so upset by what they witnessed that even **AS GOD'S OWN CHOSEN PEOPLE, THEY BECAME GREATLY DISILLUSIONED.**

When the exiles returned from Babylon to Jerusalem, the walls of the city had been broken down and everything of value in the temple had been carted off. The city was as barren a tree plucked clean after a tornado. The hearts of these people were breaking—as the ravages of war and crime and mistrust and exploitation can often leave the hearts of people—still breaking in the world today! But it was **PRECISELY** into this gloomy situation that the prophet was able to proclaim a very joyful message of what their Holy City might one day look like after it would be refashioned in the designs of God's peace.

Was there weeping and crying in Jerusalem? Of course there was! But listen to what the Lord God says: *"I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people; no more shall there be in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress" (v. 19)!*

Had there been infants who died too early? Of course there were infants who died too early, some of whom were sick, starved, or murdered! But listen now to what the LORD God says, *"No more shall there be in Jerusalem an infant that only lives a few short days!"*

Had there been adults who didn't get a fair shot at a lengthy life? Of course there had been! But now the LORD God says, *"The one who dies at one hundred years old will be considered a youth!"*

Had there ever been people in those days who offered up petitions and prayers in anguish to the Lord God, that the people themselves believed were never heard? Of course there had been, but listen to the great hope that the LORD God almighty would give to the people one day! *"Before they call, I will answer, while they are yet speaking, I will hear!"*

These are wonderful promises—soothing balm to open wounds of the memories of the great tragedy which these people have suffered! **BUT THE LORD DOESN'T STOP HERE: WHY SOME OF GOD'S PROMISES TO HIS PEOPLE OF ISRAEL BACK THEN—EVEN AS SO MANY OF GOD'S PROMISES TO YOU AND ME IN THE GIFT OF HIS SON—OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST—CERTAINLY SEEM TO BE OVER THE TOP TOO!**

"I am about to create a new heaven and a new earth," says the Lord. Even something about life and the way it was for our first parents in the Garden of Eden would be restored: *"The wolf and the lamb shall feed together; the lion shall eat straw like an ox!"*

Why was God giving to the Jewish people at that time his promise of eternity by speaking to them these outrageous promises that certainly seemed to be over the top? Sometimes it's only those "over the top kind of promises" that will us any good at all in the face of disaster and those times when we also, as mere human beings easily become ourselves the unfortunate participants or victims of some great tragedy or disaster!

If you ever have one of those days when you feel so badly that you would describe yourself as being lower than low and that it even seemed to you that you had to look up to see hell, then something over the top can surely sound very, very good!

Brothers and sisters – the sad thing that happened there on this particular day in our Lord's life and in the lives of his disciples was that **THE LORD HIMSELF HAD SUDDENLY COME TO HIS TEMPLE,** but that his presence seemed to escape the notice of most everyone who was there!

Jesus says there will be many things that will happen throughout the history of this world that would entice people to come to their own conclusion that the **LAST AND GREAT DAY OF THE LORD** will soon be here—such things as international conflicts, nations rising against nations. There will be earthquakes, times of drought and pestilences...and certainly times of persecution. Certainly these disciples themselves would be and were most definitely persecuted—which the

vast majority them eventually martyred for their—but in would be in the midst of all this personal disruption and turmoil that a believer's continued witness to the Gospel—could have its greatest impact upon the unbelieving world.

When persecuted disciples, now become apostles like Peter and John stood before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:13), and when Stephen, the first martyr stood before the Sanhedrin (Acts 6:10), and the Apostle Paul stood before King Agrippa (Acts 25:13)—they did dazzle their interrogators, even as two men named Martin Niemoller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer witnessed to Christ in the face of a severe Nazi persecution with their witness to the Gospel costing them most surely their own lives!

Perhaps Jesus lifted his eyes from the temple and looked beyond as he continued speaking: *“There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. One the earth nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power an great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near”* (vv. 25-28)!

Of course, what we have is always a matter of one's perspective:

One day, the father of a very wealthy family took his son on a trip to the country with the express purpose of showing him how poor people live. They spent a couple of days and nights on the farm of what the father assessed as being a very poor family.

On their return trip home, the father asked his son, “Did you see how poor people live?” the father asked. “Oh yeah,” said the son.

“So, tell me what you learned from this experience?” asked the father.

The son answered: “I saw that we have one dog and they had four. We have a pool that reaches 1/3 of the way into our backyard, but that they can swim in a creek that has no end.

We have imported lanterns in our garden and they have the stars at night! We have a small piece of land to live on and they have fields that go beyond our sight.

We have servants who serve us, but they serve others.

We buy our food, but they grow theirs.

We have walls around our property to protect us, they have friends to protect them.” The boy's father was speechless. Then his son added, “Thanks Dad for showing me how poor we are.”

Yet, some people's hearts will never be changed, it seems, no matter what. There are some people who are so in love with money that they can't even bear the thought of sharing anything they have with anyone else.

It's like one local United Way office that realized that it had never received a donation from the town's most successful CEO.

The person in charge of contributions actually was able to make an important visit to that CEO, in hopes of persuading him to make a contribution.

“Our research shows that out of a yearly income of at least \$500,000, you don't even give one penny to the United Way—a most scrupulous charity if ever there has been one! Wouldn't you like to give back to the community in some way?”

The CEO mulled this over for a moment and replied: “First, did your research also show that my mother is dying after a long illness, and has medical bills that are several times her annual income?”

Embarrassed, the United Way rep mumbled, “Um...no.” The CEO continued: “Or that my brother, a disabled veteran, is blind and confined to a wheelchair?”

The stricken United Way rep began to stammer out an apology. The lawyer interrupted her apology, saying: “Or that my sister's husband died in a traffic accident,” CEO's voice rising even higher in indignation, “leaving her penniless with three children?!”

The humiliated United Way rep, completely beaten, said simply, “I had no idea...” On a roll, the CEO cut her off once again: “

So, if I didn't give any money to them, why should I give any money to you?