Pentecost 26B (Proper 28B). November 17, 2024. Faith Episcopal Church, Poulsbo,WA. I Samuel 1:4-20; Hebrews 10: 11-14, [15-18], 19-25; Mark 13:1-8

The Gospel

As [Jesus] came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" 2Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."
3When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, 4"Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" 5Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. 6Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. 7When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. 8For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs."

The Sermon

After the Communist revolution in Russia in 1917, Stalin closed churches, synagogues and mosques, and called them "museums of atheism." He ordered the imprisonment and execution of thousands of religious leaders. Although during World War II some restrictions were relaxed and in recent years some churches are again able to function, much damage was done. Generations grew up with no religious education or faith. We didn't need a revolution to create similar circumstances in our country, where many people – even professing Christians – do not know even the slightest bit about Jesus or the Bible.

My grandfather was fortunate to have left Russia before 1917. However, his sisters Ernestina and Wilhelmina, remained there. They were German-Russians whose forbears had come to Russia at the request of Katherine the Great. The traumatic loss of their Lutheran church after 1917 may have felt like the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in the year 70, when the Jews lost *their* center of religious life.

These were horrendous losses for the faithful. They were apocalyptic events.

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Today's Gospel is called Mark's "little apocalypse," as opposed to the "great apocalypse" in the Book of Revelation. Talk of the end times and of wars and rumors of wars and of important buildings and institutions being destroyed – are words of apocalypse. A sign on a church near me noted, "If you think this is bad, read Revelation."

Firefighters across the nation know apocalypse. Gaza, Israel, Sudan and Ukraine know apocalypse. Hurricanes, tornados, and wars are apocalypses. Our authorities warn us to be prepared for earthquakes, tsunamis. A visit to the doctor can become a personal apocalypse. Divorce, death, depression…we know apocalypse.

Many worry that the next 4 years of our national life will be apocalyptic.

There is also the apocalyptic crisis of faith: a time when our connection with the Lord is thin and prayer seems fruitless. I once ran into a man who had stopped worshiping at the church I was serving. I asked him why and he said, "It was a colossal waste of time." Heartbreaking.

In today's first reading, the priest Eli thought Hannah's prayer was a colossal waste of time because she didn't pray the way he did. Hannah's childlessness was a month-by-month apocalypse for her.

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In today's Gospel, Jesus responds to his disciples' amazement at the size of the stones of the Jerusalem temple, "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." And that's what did happen in the year 70. Only a small remnant of the retaining wall of the temple remained. Jerusalem was burned to the ground.

Across the world we have seen magnificent old churches turned into museums, libraries, liquor stores. Not one stone will be left. Not one mass will be celebrated.

Jesus reminds his disciples NOT to depend on the power of buildings and the institutions they represent. We take note of this for our own lives too.

Apocalypse in our personal lives, our national life, our religious life. Lord, have mercy. It is appropriate to LAMENT these things. Lay them before the Lord, talk with one another.

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Years ago I observed a woman very excitedly telling my pastor after worship that a famous TV prophet said that the end of the world would occur in 6 weeks. Pastor Smith simply looked at her with love and good humor and said, "We should be so lucky!"

We will be so lucky one day. "When we have run with patience the race, we shall know the joy of Jesus." (from the hymn "I want to walk as a child of the light.")

How do we live in the meantime?

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My grandfather's sisters and their children remained in Russia and lived in a society which came to deride religion; churches were closed. But one of their sons, my second cousin, told me his story. For decades the faithful met with one another in homes. They read the Bible and the catechism. Lay people preached and prayed. They sang hymns. Once in a great while an itinerant pastor would come to baptize the babies, pray memorial prayers for the dead, bless the marriages, confirm the youth, and celebrate Holy Communion. The little community kept the faith.

After the Berlin wall came down, Grandpa's nephew, my second cousin, migrated with his family back to Germany. There, for the first time, they had a church, a choir, a Bible class, a regular pastor – and they became the most faithful members. The little group in Russia may have not had a building, perfect theology, consistent leadership, nor learned any new hymns, but they did KNOW THEIR LORD and God's gospel love.

Like Christians in the largest cathedrals or in the smallest congregations, they followed Jesus, whose own apocalypse on the cross allows us to face our own apocalypses, small and great, knowing that we shall know his joy at the end. Jesus spoke of the temple as a symbol for his own body. The temple of stones would be destroyed, but a new living temple of the Body of Christ would rise in its place. One world would end; another world would begin.

Each Sunday we celebrate Christ's victory over death. We celebrate the victory of the little congregations across the world that survive in spite of persecution.

Past victories give rise to future hopes.

Every day a grief-stricken widower begins to come back to life. Every day an alcoholic who thought she could never give up drinking is sober – one day at a time. To Hannah, a son, Samuel, is born. David overcame Goliath. South African

apartheid was outlawed. The Berlin wall came down. Past victories give rise to future hopes.

Jesus said the destruction and warfare would be the "beginning of the birth pangs." No one enjoys labor pains; however, for Hannah, for every expectant mother at full term, for Jesus' mother Mary, those birth pangs are wonderful blessings. As the labor continues, a baby is born. Hannah's Samuel became a great prophet and priest of Israel. Mary's Jesus became our Lord: the all-powerful God in humble human form.

Our hopes for new life are not in ourselves or in our institutions, but in God who continues to create. God is a faithful and good midwife who brings forth God's reign in ways we cannot even imagine: whether our lives, our institutions, our glorious dreams continue or whether time and space fall away and God's eternal love holds us in victory.

We don't have to be like the priest who called up her bishop and told him God had revealed that Jesus was coming tomorrow and what should she do. To which the bishop replied, "Look busy."

We don't have to <u>look</u> busy, because we <u>are</u> busy. Some of us will be called to heroic action, to start a movement, to summon passion for God's world, God's people, the healing of the nations. But we are not required to have outstanding gifts or talents; we are simply called to use those we have been given, as the Lord gives us the ability.

I know a family who has raised many guide dogs for blind people. They always come to love them, then they give them on to their trained-for work. Friday I learned that my friend will be receiving one of the puppies that she trained 12 years ago, now retired after years of guiding a blind man and now in need of palliative care. She and her spouse will care for that beloved dog until the dog peacefully dies. There is a story of faithfulness here – on the part of my friends and the old dog and the agency that manages these things.

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Apocalypses will come. They have already and they will again. For some of our Monday guests, the apocalypses are daily. I pray that these various apocalypses will not lead us to despair, that we will be saved from the times of trial – as we pray every Sunday.

I pray that we will be like the faithful of old. The Jerusalem Jews organized into small synagogues after their temple was destroyed. Persecuted Christians across

the world have met in homes. People have prayed in faith when bad medical diagnoses have been given. I could name many of you who are dealing with personal apocalypses **and are overcoming.** You are being sustained by our Lord and by your faith in the LIGHT that NO DARKNESS can overcome.

Thanks be to God. Amen.