

Keep On Keeping On

A sermon based on Luke 21:5-19 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

by Don Friesen
Ottawa Mennonite Church
November 15, 1998

Millennial madness is upon us. And if you have not already made plans for your Millennial Party on December 31, 1999, you better move fast! Someone already booked the Queen Elizabeth 2 for that date fifteen years ago. The Savoy Hotel in London started accepting reservations ten years ago, and is now booked solid. The New Year's Eve party at the Pyramids in Egypt is sold out, as is the party at the Taj Mahal! There may, however, be an opening at the Japanese Room at Antoine's in New Orleans because the man who booked it back in 1985 died this summer.

It puzzles me that an ambiguously-determined date stirs up so much emotion and fanfare, but those who were around at the end of the first millennium tell me the same thing happened then! Neither the fact that January 1 in the year 2000 is actually the first day of the last year of the second millennium, nor the fact that our calendar may be off by as much as four years, nor the fact that the date of a Christian era may be of little interest to millions of Jews, Muslims, and Hindus, deters Year 2000 enthusiasts!

It used to be that such intense calendar-watching was the exclusive purview of Christians. There are many of our fellow believers who at the turn of almost any calendar page will bring out coloured charts and timetables inspired by books of prophecy and proclaim that the end is near! One of the more famous episodes occurred in the early nineteenth century when a New York farmer determined from his study of the books of Daniel and Revelation that Christ would return between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844. Hundreds of thousands of people were caught up in his prediction of the end of the world. When March 21, 1844 came and went, the farmer decided he'd miscalculated and that the date should be October 22, 1844. And, wonder of wonders, many of the same people who were enthusiastic about his first prediction quit their jobs and disposed of their property in anticipation of this event, only October 22 also came and went. Even more astounding, those who were not discouraged by these two successive, well-publicized embarrassments went on to form one of the larger Protestant denominations in North America!

Calendar-watching is no longer a religious preoccupation. No doubt you have heard of the "Y2K" computer problem. Uncle Bill Gates forgot to program our computers to deal with this calendar change, and there is widespread fear that come the year 2000 our computer systems will simply shut down. Some people are so certain that this will be an electronic Armageddon that society itself will go into meltdown. In fact, one pastor in Orlando, after preaching about this to his church, finished his sermon by telling the congregation that he was resigning and moving out West to build a shelter and stockpile food!

Falling Temples

I have no such plans, and I confess to a certain reluctance to join in any millennium mania. I confess to a generous measure of skepticism about doom-saying and doomsayers, be their message of doom expressed in religious language or in technical language. And I am thankful that I belong to a congregation of skeptics who are not easily swayed by "Chicken Littles".

This month's Gospel readings, however, take us into the twilight zone of biblical literature — stories of wars and insurrections and earthquakes and famines and plagues and persecutions and other "dreadful portents," as Jesus calls them. (Luke 21:11) I don't know what inspired these foreboding words of Jesus. It may very well have been his own disciples, who acted like tourists

when they first got to Jerusalem, "ooing" and "aahing" over the city and especially its magnificent Temple! It was a beautiful temple, constructed of carved blocks of greenish white marble, some of them sixty feet long! It had been built by Herod the Great, took forty years to build, and the entire complex covered an area equal to thirty football fields!

The eastern front of the Temple was covered with gold plate which flashed in the sun! Josephus, an historian of the period, describes it more elegantly: "The outward face of the Temple... wanted (for) nothing," he writes. "...it was covered all over with plates of gold of great weight, and, at the first rising of the sun, reflected back a ... fiery splendour, and made those who forced themselves to look upon it to turn their eyes away.... ...the Temple appeared to strangers, when they were at a distance, like a mountain covered with snow, for... those parts... that were not gilt ...were exceeding white."

Jesus' disciples were remarking about the beauty of the Temple when Jesus said, "As for these things which you are looking at, the days will come in which there will not be left one stone upon another which will not be torn down." (Luke 21:6, NASB) Some of the pillars of the Temple were forty feet high! It was an glorious edifice! It was also a powerful symbol of Israel's faith and worship, and it was unthinkable that it could fall! Not only was it breathtakingly beautiful, it was considered unassailable! No one on earth save the Romans could muster enough power to destroy it, and the Romans' main interest was in maintaining a peaceful empire, so there was little danger of the Temple's destruction.

The disciples were no doubt shocked by Jesus' dramatic prediction that this magnificent monument of national pride and a symbol of stability would fall! Before the turn of the century (70 A.D.), however, Jesus' words were fulfilled when at the end of a four-year siege the Roman army burned and dismantled the great Temple stone by stone. A most devastating event for the Jewish people, the foundation of their religion and life destroyed. They were shaken to the core.

What To Do When Temples Fall?

Our skepticism about doom-saying and doomsayers should not inure us to the possibility of very real calamities. A month ago Central America was a great place to live — a pleasant climate, prosperous crops — and then Hurricane Mitch turned its way, bringing a cataclysmic disaster that some say has set Central American economies back a hundred years!

Temples do fall! Symbols of stability can be shaken. Sacred places can be destroyed. People of trust have been known to betray our trust. What to do when temples fall? When the security and stability of our world is eroded? What do you do when everything nailed down comes loose, and the people and institutions and laws in which you once put your trust fail you?

What to do when temples fall? Some of the Christians in Thessalonica, who took the end of the world seriously, had a solution — do nothing! A solution not all that pleasing to the writer of 2 Thessalonians, who complains about "believers who are living in idleness". (2 Thessalonians 3:6) Extolling toil and labour (3:8), the writer of 2 Thessalonians writes, "For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work." (3:10-11)

It could be that the believers in Thessalonica thought that with Jesus returning soon there was little need to go to a lot of work in the meantime! It occurred to me on a visit to the dentist last week that if I knew how many years I had left to live I could very easily be persuaded to forego dental work for the last decade or two.

It could also be that the believers in Thessalonica had grown weary of doing the things Jesus left us to do. It had been twenty or thirty years since the death of Jesus, and still he had not returned! Any sense of urgency to do the work of the kingdom had worn off. Their idleness wasn't really a union-like work-stoppage; it was more like an insipid adjustment to life as it is now. Perhaps in earlier years, motivated by the importance of what they were doing, they had accomplished a

great deal. Needing a place to meet and worship, they cobbled together the First Christian Church of Thessalonica, and developed programs that did a lot of good work. However, when one year of hard work blurred into the next and the next and the next, they grew tired. And when hard times came, as Jesus predicted they would, they drew back some — probably cut back on outreach, started focussing more on their own needs, and kept only one eye half-open for Jesus' return! The longer it took Jesus to return, the more they lost sight of their reason for coming together in the first place. Anticipating Shakespeare, the Thessalonians asked themselves, "To idle or not to idle? That is the question."

Earlier this week I was planning to base this sermon on the 2 Thessalonians passage. There are a lot of wonderful and colourful passages in devotional literature that are also disdainful of idlers. Martin Luther, for example, when he was asked, "Where was God before heaven was created?" replied, "He was building hell for such idle, presumptuous, fluttering and inquisitive spirits as you." (Table Talk)

Likewise William Law, the eighteenth century author of influential works on Christian ethics and mysticism, including such sombre titles as "A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life" (1728), speaks disdainfully of "foolish friendships," "levity of mind," "trifling spirits," and "idle dispositions".

Other devotional writers warn that "Satan is sure to find some mischief for idle hands to do" (Asbury Lowrey) and warn that words which appear to be but "tiny molehills of idleness and frivolity" will loom as "mountains of error" when we have to answer for them at the Last Judgement! The "Book of Homilies," which is a companion volume to the "Book of Common Prayer" contains a sermon "Against Idleness," which clerics are instructed to preach diligently "as godly and wholesome doctrine".

There are, however, other writers, with contrary opinions, whose "levity of mind" make their works more of a pleasure to read, be it Stephen Leacock and his "Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich" (1914) or poets such as William Wordsworth, who bids us:

"Come forth and feel the sun.
... Put on with speed your woodland dress,
And bring no book, for this one day
We'll give to idleness."

Robert Louis Stevenson, who had a reputation for being an idler, and wore the name jauntily, did in fact write a piece entitled "An Apology for Idlers".

I was planning to have some fun with the idleness theme, when it struck me — just in time — that to go on and on about idlers at the height of the Ten Thousand Villages sales season might be the height of impertinence! It also struck me, upon sober second thought, that to prattle on about idleness to a group with more than an average number of workaholics is like waving a bottle of beer in the face of an alcoholic! This congregation is not in great need of sermons on the nobility of hard work. Oh, there may be the odd person who prefers to pontificate on matters of policy instead of doing something practical, but generally we are used to working hard in the pursuit of what we want!

Lament for a Loss of Urgency

There are, however, other ways in which we may be idling. The word for "idle" used in our text means "to play truant". Some of us have experience with that. Quite a lot of experience. The word idle, when used of cars, can also mean to run "out of gear". It could be that in some areas of faith our clutch is not fully engaged. It appears that with respect to financial commitment to the Church some of our gears are completely stripped!

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "People wish to be settled: (but) only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them." The Church in the West has little reason to feel unsettled. Most of us are wealthy by any global measurement. We eat more than once a day, and can choose our diet. We heat our homes in winter and cool them down in summer. We travel to distant cities to visit family and friends with minimal difficulty. We have access to health care. We have access to a lot of information. The property we own is not threatened by our neighbours. Most of us have choices of employment. Our children are learning of the possibilities open to them, and there's no reason to think they can't achieve their goals. We worship in freedom, and we've enjoyed these freedoms and privileges for some time. (adapted from a publication by The Giving Project)

It's not surprising that we've grown accustomed to the stability and security of our lives. We've had ideal conditions in which to "settle in" and get comfortable. It's easy to begin feeling invincible when things are going well for us. We begin to assume that life as it is now is life as it will be. We grow less alert to catastrophes and feel less urgency about responding to them. And we certainly fail to notice more subtle, gradual developments that bode ill for us. Not all temples fall; some just crumble away.

Bill Janzen has noticed over the years of his service with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) that church leaders, including our own, used to be able to get the ear of our political leaders, but that is no longer the case. There used to be sufficient people with first-hand knowledge of the church working at CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency) that agencies like MCC didn't have to spend a long time explaining themselves when working through government channels. That is no longer the case; indeed, a number of NGOs (Non-Government Organizations) recently sponsored an orientation seminar for CIDA people simply to convey to them some very basic knowledge of the Christian Church's history and purpose.

It's not surprising, given the deepening ignorance about the historic and traditional role of the Church in developing and sustaining this country, that Revenue Canada has less and less patience and sympathy with the Christian Church's traditional charitable role. A change in language, if not in social theory, has our government considering a tax preference equivalent to a grant! A subtle change, perhaps, but it means that money never paid to the government really belongs to the government but the government in its benevolence allows us mere taxpayers to keep it. Therefore it becomes a tax expenditure, which is easier to withdraw than a tax preference, and sooner or later, given today's pluralistic climate there could very well be pressure applied to remove the "advancement of religion" purpose as a valid charitable purpose. ("Where Did Revenue Canada's Concern Come From?" CCCC Bulletin, a publication of the Canadian Council of Christian Charities. See also "The Seven Deadly Myths," by M.H. Ogilvie, Professor of Law at Carleton University, in the same Bulletin)

Do I qualify as a doom-sayer? Hardly. I have faith that a democratic society that owes much to the Christian Church and looks to the Church for increased charitable activity in an era of serious cutbacks will act judiciously. It's an example, however, of the need to remain vigilant, for life as we have it now will not necessarily remain so.

A Plea for an Astute Memory

When an athlete gets too comfortable and over-confident, he or she is liable to be caught off guard by an opponent's surprise move! Athletes perform best when they keep on their toes. Similarly we are more apt to remain faithful to our Lord if we keep on our toes and don't let our comforts lull us to sleep. A simple way to avoid that pitfall is to remember who we are. Our own history is such that we need think back only fifty to seventy years to remember that the golden life is not assured. Tragedies happen. Catastrophes occur. Our own involvement with newcomers to Canada keeps us ever mindful that security and stability are not assured.

Remembering who we are as Christians keeps us mindful that the freedom we enjoy in this country is rare among Christians. Most Christians do not live in the West. Not only was

Christianity in Africa before Europe, in India before Britain, and in China before North America, three-quarters of all Christians live outside the West. Our Christian experience is an anomaly in the world. Many Christians suffer for their faith. In China thousands of Christians have been sent to "re-education camps" because they attended prayer meetings or Bible studies. Catholic Bishop Su Zhimin, sixty-five years of age, who already spent more than fifteen years in prison, was rearrested in 1996 by authorities intent on preventing a pilgrimage he had helped organize. He went into hiding for 17 months, was arrested again last October and has not been seen since. ("Christians in the Shadow of Death." Reader's Digest, British edition, March, 1998) Paul Marshall, of the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto says that the Chinese Christians he's met with in the last twelve months report they are suffering the worst crackdown since the 1980s. ("The Plight of Religious Minorities in Asia," MCC Peace Office Newsletter, October-December, 1998)

In Cairo a teenage Coptic Christian girl was kidnapped and forced to fast, pray and memorize parts of the Koran. During her nine-month captivity she was raped repeatedly. Her captors poured sulphuric acid on her wrist to obliterate a tattoo of the cross and threatened to pour it on her face if she removed an Islamic veil. ("Christians in the Shadow of Death")

It's a good sign that the oppression of Christians, until recently ignored by most governments and human rights organizations — even by the Church — is receiving some attention. The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, which prepares kits to encourage prayer for persecuted Christians reports that four times as many kits were sent out this year as last year. ("300,000 congregations will pray for world's persecuted Christians," Ottawa Citizen, November 14, 1998)

Remembering who we are, as members of a global Christian family, can help motivate us to keep praying and working on their behalf. Remembering whose we are — God's children — can help motivate us, as the New Testament says, to "keep on doing the things that (we) have learned and received" (Philippians 4:9), and to keep on keeping on.

The survivors of Hurricane Mitch have come through unbelievable devastation. Whole families, villages and communities have been wiped out. It could well cause some to question the providence of God, but Laura Isabel Arriola de Guity, a 36 year-old school teacher from Honduras who lost her home and family to the hurricane and was herself swept away into the Caribbean Sea, begs to differ. Using debris in the water she fashioned a raft out of tree roots, branches and a board. Alone and adrift at sea for six days, Laura passed the time singing hymns and praying. When asked how she managed to survive she said, "...it was because I was in the arms of God. God had me in his arms...." ("Survivors reeling from unholy fury of Mitch," Ottawa Citizen, November 9, 1998)

Someone has coined a phrase to the effect that no matter what the world hands you, the world remains in the hands of God. A Honduran bishop (Leo Frade) voiced the same faith in God's providence when he said, "We are now in rags, sick and wounded, surrounded with death, but we still say to you and to anyone who cares to listen: God reigns, yes, God reigns!" Therefore, as the writer of Thessalonians told his fellow believers, "Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right" (3:13); "do not grow weary of doing good (NASB); "...never tire of doing what is right." (NIV) Keep on keeping on.