

Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church, Hatfield
25th Sunday after Pentecost, November 14, 2021
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe + “Telling Time” (Mark 8:1-13)

I started my college career as a history major because that was my father’s profession. But it quickly became clear that the music department was my home. When not in class or studying in the library, I spent virtually all my time in the music building and was quickly absorbed into that extended family. The heart and soul of the department was the longtime chairman and choral director who was a master of dry wit. I vividly remember how he pulled me aside on graduation day and, eyebrows raised in mock seriousness, solemnly told me: “Don’t let them pull the wool over your eyes.”

I really don’t know what he was getting at. Maybe I looked like someone who could be easily deceived. At that point in my life, he was probably right.

In today’s Gospel Jesus has this same concern for his disciples. As the reading opens they are gawking at the sheer enormity of Herod the Great’s temple, which after 50 years was still under construction. Built of massive blocks of stone 60 feet long, and nearly a mile in circumference, it could have held 12 football fields. Jesus can tell the disciples are thinking, “Only someone truly great could build something so magnificent.”

Of course Herod was anything but great--we know him well from the story of the magi as a small-minded despot so paranoid about the newborn Jesus being a rival that he ordered all male children two and younger in the entire region to be slaughtered. So Jesus corrects the disciples’ assumption: Don’t be deceived by this appearance of grandeur, because it will all be thrown down, every last stone.

This immediately distracts the disciples from the lesson at hand. Every last stone?? When this will happen, they pester Jesus, and what will be the sign of the coming destruction? They are lost to the present, which is where learning takes place, and instead become fixated on the future.

I don’t know about you, but I think we fall victim to this same kind of distraction in constantly checking our watches. What are we really doing? We are not actually interested in what the time IS, but looking to see how much time we have before our the next place we have to be. Just like the disciples, this yanks us out of the present. We are no longer paying full attention to where we are because we’re worried about where we have to be and when.

In many ways our culture constantly tempts us abandon the present for some vague future. Wear this, and you *will* look better. Eat this, and you *will* feel better. Buy this, and you *will* be the envy of your friends. All this energy focused on what may or may not happen depletes our awareness of the present, which is where we must be located in order to function fully and effectively.

So let’s ask: How can we learn to tell time--to tell THE time--by opening ourselves to the reality of what is, instead of letting that awareness be drained by fast-forwarding into the unknown?

This is where the wool comes back in. The less aware we are of what is actually going on, the more vulnerable we become to deception by false messiahs have figured out how to stir up fear and manipulate it for their own purposes. This is the classic definition of someone pulling the wool over our eyes--they are trying to deceive us and to use us to their advantage. We fall in line behind them because we have lost the clarity in the present to resist.

Jesus puts this to the disciples in point-blank terms: "Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray."

And come they did, often with disastrous consequences. A hundred years after Jesus' death and resurrection, a shadowy figure calling himself the Jewish messiah arose from within the Jewish military. He gave himself the surname "Bar Kokhba" meaning "Son of a Star" in Aramaic, from the Star Prophecy verse from Numbers 24:17: "There shall come a star out of Jacob."

Dazzled by the title and his announcement that the era of redemption had finally arrived, hordes of fanatics fell in behind him. He named himself ruler of a new parallel country, also called Israel. With the backing of the Jewish temple establishment he led a revolt against Roman rule. It failed, because of course Bar Kokhba was not the Messiah. But the scale of destruction left in its wake was almost apocalyptic--nearly a million lives lost in Judea alone, a thousand villages razed to the ground, countless captives sold into slavery. Jewish communities were devastated to an extent that some scholars have characterized as genocide. And all because of one false messiah.

We will always be contending with imposters who claim they have come in the name of that for which we long. Our best defense is to learn to tell time in the present. Watch what they are doing. Listen to what they are saying. Then evaluate their claims in the light of what you know to be true about Jesus Christ. People are hungry: Are they being fed?

To keep from being led astray we must not only know who Jesus is. We must be fully aware of who we are, what is our identity in Christ.

As Rachel Held Evans has so beautifully put it, "We all move through the world in the same state--broken and beloved." This is why we begin worship by confessing before each other the truth that God already knows--that we are all in need of healing and grace. Our liturgy of healing today invites you to move more deeply into this identity that we all share through Christ's own suffering.

So in the midst of this community of faith, come. Come with your well of loneliness. Come with your anxiety and doubt. Come with your yearning to be loved. Come with your fear of death. Come with your injuries, your pain. Open yourself fully to our Lord and Savior just as you are. Be fully present to him in the midst of this community of love and faith, for he is our hope and refuge in the midst of every storm. Be fully present, and come.

Amen.