

The Gospel of the Kingdom to the ends of the earth

Mt. 24.1-14

A certain anthropologist was doing some research on some island in the South Pacific. As he was walking by a village, he stumbled upon an aboriginal with nothing on but a pair of boxers reading a book under a tree. His curiosity piqued, he approached the man and asked what book he was reading. The native replied, "the Bible". The self-assured anthropologist then said with a bit of sarcasm, "You know, in a civilized society, we've done away with this book a long time ago. It is not worth your time." The native looked up and replied with a smile on his face, "dear sir, you would've been in my stomach if it wasn't for this book."

I know everyone here agrees to what the Apostle Paul said in Romans 1.16-17, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."" The power of the gospel transforms life. Through the indwelling and assistance of the Holy Spirit, it quickens men and women, saves them from the bondage of sin and the corruption of old self, and ushers in a new life and nature from above.

Today, along with the past two Sundays, the church has been promoting the campaign of Adopt a Verse. Through this endeavor we encourage brothers and sisters to pay closer attention to the three unreached people groups called the Patip Cluster, and to financially support Seed Company to translate the Bible into their language with the hope that they too can hear the Gospel of the Lord. Our message is part of this concerted effort to encourage everyone.

You may be familiar with the verses we read this morning, Matthew 24.3-14. We know it's about Jesus talking to the disciples on Mount of Olives about what would happen in the last days. Verse 3 says, "As [Jesus] sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

Why would the disciples ask Jesus about the end of the age? Verses 1-2 tells us that it is because as they walked out of the Temple, the disciples were speaking excited about the grandiosity and the magnificence of the building. But Jesus, on the contrary, showed no sign of agreeing to it. Instead he rained on their parade by predicting that even such grandiosity would tumble down and be leveled. Befuddled by Jesus' response, the disciples decided to ask Jesus during a break on the Mount of Olives about the day of the destruction of the Temple and the tribulations that Jesus spoke about. What would be the sign of the end of the age? Jesus then proceeded to describe the scenes in response to their inquiry.

According to John 2.20, the Temple, built by the Roman Empire, had been standing for 46 years by then. New Testament scholars agree that this is technically the third temple. But Jews disagree by insisting that this was but a refurbishment of the one built by the returning exiles in 516 BC. With the hope of winning Jewish favors as well as flexing his political muscles, Herod the Great, the Roman-backed King of Judea, started building the Jerusalem Temple in 19 BC. It took ten years to complete according to the instructions of the teachers of the law. Although the style followed that of the Solomon Temple, its size was much greater. The square around the Temple alone was more than doubled in size. One can imagine with the might and the riches of the Roman empire, this renovated temple must have been monumental.

When the disciples questioned Jesus about the sign of the last days, their understanding of it is quite different from what Jesus said. If we are familiar with the Old Testament, we know that whenever the prophets speak of “the day of the Lord”, or “the latter days”, it often refers to the long-expected day when the God-sent Messiah delivers them from all of their enemies and sufferings. In the traditional Jewish understanding, this Messiah, sent by God, is a political figure and a king with great authority and abilities. When Jesus walked in his ministry, he traveled everywhere to preach powerfully the gospel of the kingdom. He healed the sick and liberated the demon-possessed. He performed signs and wonders and drew people to follow him by the authority and power in him. Many wanted to crown him king. Even the disciples of Jesus thought of him as the Messiah-Savior sent from God to deliver Israel from the hands of the enemies. So the days of Jesus and his disciples were the latter days. Therefore they were referring the contemporary age when they questioned him about the latter days, not some distant future. But the answer Jesus gave was ambivalent. It can refer to their time or a distant future. This is also the reason why many scholars find Matthew 24 difficult to interpret.

Here in Matthew 24.3-14, Jesus is explaining to the disciples the latter days and the signs. But in addition, he is actually stating three crucial truths about the gospel of the kingdom.

First, Jesus the incarnate Word entered the world to reveal the mystery of the gospel of salvation hidden for ages.

I have mentioned that Jesus spoke about the signs of the latter days in response to their marveling at the magnificence of the Temple. We may be puzzled at the slightly negative response of Jesus at this. The Temple is the house of God, the center of Jewish worship. Being the Son of God, Jesus ought to be a bit more cheerful by the size and grandeur of the Temple. But Jesus rained on their parade by predicting the decimation of the temple, to the point that not one stone would be left upon another. The disciples were baffled by his words.

In fact when we turn to John 2, we see clearly the scene of Jesus cleansing the Temple during the Passover in Jerusalem. The Temple, the center of all Jewish worship, had become a de facto market place during Jesus’ time. Merchants were exchanging cattle, sheep, and doves for money. Jesus was angered by such practice. He immediately drove out the animals, turned over the money-changer’s tables, and rebuked them for turning the Temple of worship into a market place. Even though the Jews kept the law and worshiped in the Temple on holidays, they only did so outwardly. Their hearts were not worshipping God truly. God knows the inner thoughts of man and his motives. He does not favor such hypocrisy. This is why Jesus tells the disciples that the Temple will be destroyed and rebuilt in three days. What the disciples cannot grasp is that how a temple as grandiose as this can be torn down. And how can this Temple, which took 46 years to build, be torn down and rebuilt within 3 days? In fact, history indicates that the Jerusalem Temple was indeed leveled by the Roman general Titus in 70 AD, according to the prediction of Jesus. The locale of Jewish faith, the visible center of worship, this monumental building, suddenly disappeared. Jesus speaks these words to indicate his impending death and resurrection after 3 days. He supplants the visible Temple to become the meeting place of God and men. Man may approach God through him and form a relationship with God. This statement proclaims the advent of a new age. The incarnate Son of God Jesus came into the world to be with the world. He was lifted up on the cross to be a penal substitute and to die for sinful men, so that men may receive the forgiveness of sin, the reconciliation with God, and have eternal life. God took on the flesh to reveal the mystery of the redemptive history, and to inaugurate the Kingdom of God in the world. Indeed it is also the beginning of the end of the age.

The apostle Paul reminds us in Ephesians 3.5-6, "[the mystery of Christ] was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

Second, the birth and establishment of the church, to proclaim the mystery of the gospel of the kingdom.

The coming of Jesus Christ brought God's ruling from heaven into the human history. If one confesses his sin and trusts in Jesus, he will freely receive this salvation and become a member of God's community through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Therefore the disciples of Christ have two kingdom identities: one belongs to the current kingdom of the world; the other to the eternal kingdom of God. This life in the world will end, but the life in God lasts forever. By the coming of Jesus, the kingdom of God arrives in this world. More and more believe, and the kingdom grows. But the time of God's complete ruling has not arrived, and his kingdom inconsummate.

We read in Matthew 24 that Jesus predicts tribulations in the latter days when the Temple is leveled. This draws the attention of the disciples. They ask when the end of age will come. What signs will accompany that? I think the disciples aren't the only ones who want to know. We are like them. If we know the time, we can be ready. The disciples think the end of age to be a time point. But the end of age according to Jesus is a time period. The beginning of this period is when he incarnated and came into human history. This period will last till his second coming. That will be the end of the latter days.

This is why when we read Matthew 24.4-12, we sense that the signs that Jesus speaks of are showing up in our own time, "And Jesus answered them, "See that no one leads you astray. 5 For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray. 6 And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. 7 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. 8 All these are but the beginning of the birth pains. "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. 10 And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. 11 And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. 12 And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold."

In fact, starting with the period of Jesus, the Devil has never stopped attacking the Church and God's people. They will only end at Jesus' second coming. Although Jesus never specifies the exact starting and ending point of the latter days, his narrative in Chapter 24 clearly indicates that from his first coming as the incarnate Word to his second coming as the royal King, it is the dispensation of the latter days.

We see during this end of the age period; a crucial community was established. And it is the church. The Church is composed of people who are called and elected by God, saved and forgiven through the cross of Jesus Christ, and are members of God's family. It is an organic being that grows and develops. Before his ascension as the victor over death, Jesus commissioned them to preach the gospel. He gave them authority and power to continue his work on earth, which is to preach Christ crucified and the forgiveness and reconciliation it brings. So that men may believe and receive Christ to inherit eternal life. This is what Matthew 28.18-20 says, "And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have

commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” After the Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended on the Christians to empower them. Churches spread like wild fires from Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria, the European continent and so on.

The church, established and empowered by the Lord, has been entrusted to continue his work of preaching the Kingdom gospel to turn people from darkness to light, and into the kingdom of God. For that reason, the Devil continues to divide and pummel the church through means of political persecution, false teaching, and the enticement of the vainglory of the world. Some Christians become afraid, discouraged, and indifferent to the faith, ending up wavering in their hope and in apostasies. These are depicted in Chapter 24.3-12. Jesus foreknows these things, so he reminds the disciples in Verse 13 to endure to the end, because “the one who endures to the end will be saved.”

The church is by God’s design and his workmanship. She plays an unparalleled role in preaching the Gospel of Christ. Therefore the Apostle Paul prays for the people of God in Ephesians 1.17-20, “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places.” So that the Christians will recognize how precious their calling is, how richly abundant the inheritance is in the future, and how great the power is in their possession. So that they can be valiant and enduring by the help of the Holy Spirit when facing the persecutions and attacks aforementioned, and continue to spread the Gospel.

Third, Gospel to the ends of the earth; all peoples to Christ. The moment of the glorious return of Christ.

After telling the disciples about the signs of the latter days, Jesus says in Verse 14 that “this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” Simply put, it means despite the many troubles and danger, the gospel of Christ cannot be stopped. Christians of every age will exalt Christ valiantly and march onward with the help of the Holy Spirit, testifying as one to all peoples until they turn to Christ. The moment when the gospel has reached the ends of the earth is when Christ shall return in glory.

Often, we are disheartened when looking at today’s world, with all the tumult and unrest, with all the news about political persecution, violent religious extremists, and the seemingly total control in some areas by criminal forces. We ask, can the gospel of Christ really reach the ends of the earth? The answer is a resounding, yes!

Isaiah the prophet reminds us in Isaiah 46.10 that our God is the one who controls the human history by “declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.’”

If God is faithful, his promise will be fulfilled. But we may ponder, “it has been more than 2000 years since the first coming of Jesus. Why hasn’t he come to judge? How much longer?”

The apostle Peter tells us in Second Peter 3.8-9, “But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. 9 The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but

that all should reach repentance.” The Apostle Paul reminds us in First Timothy 2.4, “[God] desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

Brothers and sisters, as fellow sons and daughters of God, we must resonate with our heavenly Father’s desire to preach this precious gospel to the unbelievers, so that they have a chance to hear it while they are alive.

Paul tells us in Romans 10.13-15, “For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? 15 And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”

In the world today, there are still more than a thousand people groups that don’t have the bible in their own language. Our mission department has been promoting the Adopt-a-Verse campaign with the hope that you will adopt a verse at the cost of 35 dollars, so that the unreached groups in the Patip Cluster in Southeast Asian may have their own bible, hear the gospel of our Lord, and become children of God.

Finally, I will end my message with a story. Some of us may have seen the Oscar-winning film *Schindler’s List*. It depicts the Schindler saving more than a thousand Jews by employing them from a Nazi concentration camp.

This is the ending of the film: the Jews were liberated after the surrender of Germany. As Oskar Schindler was packing up, a representative of the workers handed him a letter defending his role during the war in case he was captured by the Allies. The letter described what Schindler did for the Jews, along with their signatures. In addition, they gave him a golden ring as a gift, with the inscription, “Whoever saves one life saves the world entire”, a proverb from the Talmud. At first appreciative and gratified, Schindler nonetheless started muttering after putting on the ring, “I could’ve got more”. “Why did I keep the car? Ten people, right there. Ten more I could’ve got” He ripped off the swastika pin from the lapel, saying, “this is gold; two more people.” He regrets the fact that he didn’t do more to save more Jews. He beats himself up when presented with the gratitude of the Jews.

Brothers and sisters, what account shall we give when standing before the judgement seat? Let us not be indifferent to the souls of the unreached, for they are loved by God. If we eat out a few times less, we can save even more souls by the translation of the Bible. One day when we are in heaven, many whom you don’t recognize will come to thank you, because it was your generosity that afforded him the chance to read the Bible, to hear the gospel and to believe in Jesus. That will be a truly joyful moment. It pleases our Lord to see the endeavor of supporting bible translation.

Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, and join together the work of adopting bible verses, so that we may finish the work entrusted to us by the Lord.