

## **Desolating Sacrilege**

*November 19, 2006*

(Pentecost 24 - Year B)

Mark 13: 14-23

*St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas*

The Gospel reading appointed for this Sunday is an example of why using a lectionary is a good thing.

The Lectionary is a three year cycle of Bible readings, directing us to the portions of the Bible to be read on a particular Sunday.

And, the Lectionary forces us to read parts of the Bible that we wish were not there.

For example, today's reading from the Gospel of Mark begins:

“But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains.

The one on the housetop must not go down or enter the house to take anything away...

Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days!

For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation.”

Not exactly a warm and fuzzy passage for this Sunday before Thanksgiving Day!

The writer of the Gospel of Mark speaks of “the desolating sacrilege.” Mark writes about fleeing to the mountains and woes for childbearing women.

Mark writes about extreme suffering.

The language in this Gospel reading might seem strange to us.

But, these words were *not* strange to the Christian community that Mark was writing to.

The writer of the Gospel of Mark uses words and phrases directly from

the Old Testament Book of Daniel.

The Book of Daniel was an apocalyptic book, speaking of the future destruction and desecration of the Jewish Temple.

And, the Jewish Christians in Mark's community knew the Book of Daniel well.

The Christians in Mark's community could remember back 200 years, to 167 BC, when the Temple had been desecrated and defiled by King Antiochus.

The Christians in Mark's community could remember *recent* history, in 70 AD, when the Temple was destroyed and defiled by the Romans.

The original readers of Mark's Gospel were well aware of the desolating sacrilege that they had seen in their own Temple at the hands of foreign powers.

Now, if the writer of the Gospel of Mark was to write to Americans today, he might write this:

“But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the viewer understand), then office workers in Manhattan must flee across the Brooklyn Bridge.

The one who is in the towers must go down the stairs and not turn back to get his cell phone.

Woe to those who are firefighters or those who fly in airplanes on that day.

For in those days there will be suffering.”

We all know that we are talking about September 11th.

And in the same way, the readers of Mark's Gospel knew exactly what Jesus was talking about.

Jesus was talking about the desecration of the Jewish Temple by foreign powers.

Jesus warns us in this Gospel passage to be on the alert.

Jesus warns us to be alert for signs of invasion by foreign powers.

Yet, I believe that Jesus was not as concerned about invasions by foreign

powers into our temples or into our countries.  
But, I believe that Jesus is more concerned about foreign invasions into  
the temple of our hearts.

The American holiday season begins in earnest this Thursday.  
And, during this holiday season, we need to be concerned about foreign  
invasions into our own hearts.

When Susan and I were in New York City last month, we saw an off-  
Broadway show.

After the show, we purchased a CD of Christmas music, performed by  
various Broadway artists.

Last week, we opened this CD to sample the music.

And, on this CD is a song entitled:

The Key to Christmas.

The words of this song go like this:

*Mistletoe and angels  
Stockings hung with care.  
Or snow that is falling, fresh and new.  
All of these are Christmas  
Treasures that we share.  
But, the key to Christmas is inside of you.*

On the surface, this song sounds warm and cozy.

But, we must be on the alert for foreign invasions into our heart that  
come wrapped up in mistletoe and gingerbread lattes.

For the desolating sacrilege, brought in by foreign invaders, is in  
convincing us that Thanksgiving and Christmas are all about us.

The key to Christmas is *not* inside of you.

The key to Christmas is in Jesus, the true Messiah, who suffers and is  
risen.

For, the followers of Jesus Christ are not just wrapped up in warm  
holiday sentiments.

The followers of Jesus Christ, the true Messiah, see the desolating  
sacrilege as an invasion into our hearts,

A twisting of the Gospel message into a message of feel-good self-power.

Yesterday, Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes tied the knot in a Roman castle.

And, the wedding liturgy that Tom and Katie used was from the Church of Scientology.

So, out of curiosity, I looked up this wedding liturgy on the internet.

What I discovered was a desolating sacrilege of self-love and starry-eyed navel-gazing, brought in by foreign invaders.

The Church of Scientology wedding service implies that marriage depends completely upon our romantic love for each other.

There is no mention of God's love for us or of a common commitment to Jesus.

For, the true key to Christian marriage is not the power of our own love for each other.

The key to Christian marriage is in the sacrificial partnership of two people who are loved by God and who have committed themselves to the suffering Christ.

The followers of Jesus Christ, the true Messiah, see the desolating sacrilege as an invasion into our hearts,

A twisting of the Gospel message into a message of hearts and flowers, with no mention of God's suffering and sacrificial love.

As we enter this holiday season, I invite you to listen to Jesus' words in this difficult Gospel reading this morning.

Jesus says:

“If anyone says to you: “Look! Here is the Messiah!” or

“Look! There he is!” - do not believe it.

False Messiahs and false prophets will appear...to lead [you] astray.

But, be alert; I have already told you everything.”

Jesus has already told us everything.

The Christian life involves a lifetime of rejection and suffering and then, resurrection.

Everything we need to know about being a true Christian follower can  
be found in the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But when foreigners and false prophets try to invade your heart and lead  
you astray, do not be fooled by the desolating sacrilege.

For the desolating sacrilege will come to modern Americans in the form  
of attractive illusions:

The illusion of the perfect family gathered around the Thanksgiving  
table,

Or the illusion of a fairy tale Hollywood wedding,

Or the illusion of a Christmas that is inside of you.

But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to  
be:

Be alert!

The crucified and risen Jesus has already told you everything.

AMEN.

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