

Do you remember how you felt when you saw passenger jets take down the World Trade Center on September 11? Evoking those feelings will help you hear the Gospel of Matthew with clarity. We need that clarity, because we have a disturbing tendency to distort the Gospels' picture of Jesus. We come close at times to making Him effeminate. He's not like that. What we read today puts Him in the category of someone to be feared as well as loved. The memory of September 11 creates an emotional context that brings to life how serious He was about the kingdom of Heaven.

His serious intensity smites us in Matthew 24:1-2. **Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."**

Shock and disbelief would be the mild responses to His prediction. It went far beyond Jesus' previous, inflammatory actions. He had driven moneychangers out of the Jerusalem temple. He had told in the temple a parable of how the leaders of Jewish religious life were going to be removed and replaced by others. Both the violence and the parable earned Him the animosity of those leaders. But to say that the temple was going to be destroyed struck at Jewish national identity like a blow to the face.

His disciples felt it and finally recovered enough to ask Him about His drastic prediction. Verse 3: **As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"**

Really? I could understand if they said, **"When will this happen?"** and stopped there. That's what anyone would want to know. But they didn't stop there. They had a second question. **"What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"** As far as they were concerned, the end of the temple meant the end of the world. "So, Jesus, help us to be ready for it. How can we know when it is going to happen?" Jesus' answer to their questions occupies chapters 24 and 25.

Deception and Disaster

At first, His answer ignored both questions. He was doing them a favor. They wanted a timetable. He did not give them one. Instead, He gave them what we can call early warning signs. There are four of them: religious deception, political and natural disasters, persecution of Christians, and the worldwide spread of Christianity. "You, my friends, want to know about the end of the world. That's understandable, but I can't let the end of the world divert your attention from what happens in the world before that time comes. There's too much at stake to let that distract you." That's good advice for us.

Let's look at each warning sign. The first is deception. Verses 4-5: **Jesus answered, "Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many."** We live in a low, dishonest age. We see it in politics, science, sports, and the mortgage business. That's a story for another day. That is not the deception Jesus warned us about. His troubling statement in verse 5 says that **"many will come in my name."** He was talking about deception within the Church by leaders of the Church, who invoke the name of Christ to give their teaching authority. Every church is vulnerable to that threat.

Let's focus on Jesus' cautionary command in verse 4: **"Watch out that no one deceives you."** How do we do that? The Church protects us against deception. You can't

say scripture protects us. False teachers use scripture. You can't say the Holy Spirit protects us, as if He were separate from the Church. He guides us into all truth (John 16:13), which means He guides the Church into all truth.

The Church protects us against deception, but not congregations in isolation from each other. BVBC protects us, because this congregation stands in doctrinal unity with dozens of churches locally, with hundreds of thousands of church bodies worldwide, and with the whole Church since the days of Jesus and the apostles. "It is the use of Scripture as Scripture by the church as a whole over the many centuries of its history in a wide variety of historical contexts which vindicates its capacity to convey the Word of God to God's people." (Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 146) We call this broad agreement with what is true about God and the Church's shared experience across the centuries the Great Tradition of the Church.

Within BVBC the pastors and lay leaders are crucial for maintaining our connection with the Great Tradition that protects us. Speaking personally: I have never been stifled in my efforts to be creative in ministry, except in one regard. I never tamper with the message of the gospel. I did not make the gospel. Jesus and the apostles made that, and it has made me. I am privileged to stand side by side with the other pastors of this church and with the board of deacons; we do not tamper with the message of the gospel. The more of you in the congregation who share those convictions, the stronger will be this congregation, when seductive voices try to deceive us.

You should expect BVBC's next senior pastor to maintain this connection with the Church's Great Tradition. That's another reason why you should pray for the search committee, the board of deacons, and the pastoral staff, as they search for this person. Whatever the next senior pastor's gifts, personality, and experience, you the congregation must be satisfied that he will not tamper with the message of the gospel.

Deception in the Church is an early warning sign of the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the age. So is political and social disaster. Verses 5-7: Jesus said, "**You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places.**"

It sounds very contemporary, doesn't it? Ukraine, Iraq, Syria, Israel, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Boko Haram in Africa! Earthquakes in Haiti, Chile, and Japan. There is plenty more in our worry box: Ebola, the bomb in Iran and North Korea, and cyber attacks on American retail giants like Target and on the American power grid.

In the face of all these worries Jesus says, "**See to it that you are not alarmed.**" If you find it hard not to be alarmed, His first reason not to be alarmed will not make you feel better. "**Such things must happen.**" Try as we might and try as we should anywhere in the world to negotiate peace, feed the hungry, and heal dreadful diseases, our best efforts only partially succeed. Thank God for the people who make the effort and have partial success! But war, famine, disease, and natural disasters must happen. But that's not the end of the story.

Back to verse 6: **Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.** As awful as these calamities can be, they will not have the final word in human experience. The power that ordains them limits them. The Righteous One limits them. The Righteous One has in mind a far-off divine event toward which He is moving the whole creation. He says, "**Such things must happen.**"

They must happen, because in them **the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.**" (Romans 1:18) We usually think of divine judgment as something dreadful that God does to sinners. True enough, but divine judgment is also something God stops doing for sinners. He stops protecting us against ourselves. He removes restraints on the dark side of our nature. He says, "You want to live your life without me. Very well. I will step away and let you have your way." War, AIDS, and hunger in the midst of plenty are some of the results we can see. Political and social disasters are early warning signs of the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the age

Persecution and Preaching

A third warning sign appears in verses 9-13. Jesus said to His disciples, "**Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me.**" More people died in the 20th century because they bore the name Christian than in the previous 19 centuries combined. The 21st century bids fair to match the bloody 20th.

We are right to honor the martyrs of the Church. They are heroes of the Faith. They are the key to the conversion of the nations. Jesus was also dreadfully frank about the casualties of persecution. Verses 10-11: "**At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people.**" The deceivers reappear to show Christians how to avoid persecution by compromising their faith.

Verse 12 is grim. "**Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold.**" He means our love for God can grow cold. When we see freedom of religious expression diminished and moral values turned upside down and evil men imprison, banish, and kill Christians, the tempter whispers to us, "It's pointless, you know. You've lost. Why are you wasting your time? You could be doing some real good if you'd focus on something else." (R. R. Reno, "The Public Square," *First Things*, March 2014, 7) Persecution is our third early warning sign of the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the age.

It may seem out of place to talk about persecution in this country. We are not under imminent threat of persecution. But I came across a comment you should hear. Francis Cardinal George was Catholic Archbishop of Chicago until his retirement last month. He made the provocative statement "that, while he would die in his bed, his own successor would die in prison and his successor's successor would be martyred in the public square." (<http://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/12/cardinal-francis-george>, accessed December 1, 2014) Let's continue to pray: "**Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.**"

But the Archbishop of Chicago didn't stop there. His successor's successor who, he said, would be martyred in the public square, would also "pick up the shards of a ruined society and slowly help rebuild civilization, as the Church has done so often in human history." (Ibid) The fourth early warning sign in verse 14 is astonishing. Jesus said: "**And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations.**" Deception, disaster, persecution, and global spread! One of these things is not like the other. One of these things just doesn't belong. Can you tell which thing is not like the others, before I finish my song?"

The Church in all Her beautiful, maddening, global diversity is embryo to the kingdom of Heaven to come. The Church rises in the slums of Caracas and in the upscale condos of Shanghai. The royal family of Saudi Arabia and the dictator of North Korea can't stop it. Science and technology are no match for it. There are more Christians in Africa, south of the Sahara Desert, than there are people in the United States. Christ is building a global Church that renounces violence, gives glory to God in its worship, and bears witness to Christ throughout the whole wide world. The energy of God courses through her congregations. It is the energy of an athlete stepping into the arena. It is the joy of a bride proceeding to her groom at the altar. The Church in her fruitfulness is an early warning sign of the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the age.

Birth Pains

There is something else odd about these four signs. Haven't we seen them all routinely for the last 2000 years? Their scope is new in our time, but they are not new. How did Jesus think they would help Christians be ready for the Second Coming of Christ? Christ suggested an answer in verse 9: "**All these are the beginning of the birth pains.**" Think of it this way. A pregnant woman's contractions start easy and don't last long. They become intense and can last ever so long and no baby. The last moments of pushing a new baby into the world are the most intense. Religious deception, political disaster, the persecution of Christians, and the spread of God's kingdom are the birth pains of the old creation. At the last crisis their intensity will become very great, and the kingdom of heaven will emerge into this world.

Until that last push, they remind us that God is guiding human life into the future He has in mind. This world's misery doesn't have the last say. The misery itself wakens unshakable hope in our hearts.

Take Away

The Apostle John framed the perfect take away from what we have talked about today. He wrote this in 1 John 2:17: **The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.** That doesn't mean we try to escape the world or disrespect the world or stop trying to make the world a better place. It's our home. We need to take care of it. The apostle just means we never treat it like it is the only world there is. And it is in fact passing away before our eyes. What is permanent is the will of God, and what makes us permanent is doing the will of God. 95% of doing the will of God is doing what we are already doing but for a new reason: for the glory of God.