

4th Sunday of Advent, December 23, 2007, Liturgical Year "A"
ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

"One More Time..."

THE SECOND ADVENT

In less than two days we will be celebrating the greatest event in human history – God becoming human flesh in the Person of Jesus, the Son of God. But we are still in the season of Advent. Advent literally means "coming." In the season of Advent we prepare for Christ's first coming at Christmas, but we also prepare ourselves for His return. One of the ways we do this is by making sure we are aware of the signs before He comes – being aware of the signs of the times, so to speak.

Jesus gave us the signs in His Word and told us to watch for them. In **Matthew 24** and **25**, **Mark 13** and **Luke 21**, Jesus warns us again and again to watch out that we are not deceived by false messiahs and prophets and to always be ready to meet Him as we see the signs of His approaching return.

THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL

Now I want everyone to look up to the right of the credence table. What do you see? The flag of Israel. Have you ever wondered why we have the flag of Israel in the sanctuary of our church? I mean, we aren't Jewish, so why have an Israeli flag? The reason is twofold. First, as Christians we come out of the Jewish tradition. All the first disciples were Jews. Jesus was born of a Jewish mother. He came first to the Jews and then His message was spread to the Gentiles. Our Old Testament was and still is the same Word of God used by the Jewish people. And our New Testament was written by Jewish believers. The Word of God even tells us "*Salvation is of the Jews.*" So it is a reminder of our roots. But there is also another reason. God has not forgotten His people Israel. Though Jesus was rejected by the majority of Jews at His first coming, He is not finished with them. Remember what He said from the cross? "*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.*"

The Bible tells of a day when God will not only restore His people Israel by bringing them back to their homeland, it tells of a day when the Jews will recognize Jesus as their Messiah. Listen, for a moment to these Scriptures:

The Lord gives the prophet Zechariah a vision of the end of the age when Jerusalem will be surrounded by armies of the nations of the world and they will be delivered and God declares: "*And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.*" (Zech. 12:10)

The Apostle Paul writes, "*I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written - "The deliverer will come from Zion; He will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins."* (Rom. 11:25-27).

And so if God is going to redeem Jerusalem, if Jesus is going to return to the Mount of Olives and sit on a throne from Jerusalem to judge the nations, don't you know think that He still has a plan for the Jewish people? And that is why if you are going to be familiar with the signs that will take place before Christ's return you need to always keep an eye on the state of Israel.

REPLACEMENT THEOLOGY

Now for many centuries the Church took the view that God was done with Israel and that the Church replaced Israel as the true people of God. Thus, all the prophecies pertaining to Israel and the Second Coming simply refer to the Church. This kind of thinking is called replacement theology. And it seemed to make sense since there was no more temple, no more Jewish capital, and no more state of Israel. The Moslems took a similar approach. But they say that they have not only replaced the Jews, but the Christians as well. The prophet Mohammed came along in the 6th century and proclaimed that he and his followers were the real chosen ones of God and that they would be the ones to usher in the Kingdom of Allah. As a result, there have been terrible persecutions throughout the history of the three faiths, Christians attacking and killing Jews, and Moslems attacking and killing both Jews and Christians.

A NATION AND CITY REBORN

But something began to happen in the 19th century. Jewish families began to return to their homeland. They were called Zionists. Zion is a term used in the Scriptures to refer to Israel in its glorified state.

Some wondered why people would return to a barren land with swamps and malaria and hostile Palestinians. Even Mark Twain is said to have remarked upon visiting the Holy Land in the mid 1800's, “What a God forsaken place, who would want this?”

Still the Zionist movement began to grow within the Jewish community and more and more Jews talked of having their own homeland once again. How would this happen? After World War 2, as a result of the Holocaust the world felt compassion for the Jewish nation, and within a day, the UN formally approved land in the former British Palestine to be the new the state of Israel on November 29, 1947. The Palestinian Arabs fought against this resolution but to no avail. On May 14, 1948, Israel declared her independence. And for the first time in nearly 2000 years the Jewish people were back in their own land with their own nation. And for the first time in 2600 years they had control of their own borders.

The ancient language of Hebrew was revived. But the eastern half of their ancient capital Jerusalem and much of their former lands still lay in Arab hands. This changed in 1967 as a result of the Six Day War when Israel defeated three Arab armies of superior numbers in six days and reunified Jerusalem. All of Jerusalem was now controlled by the Jews – another first in nearly 2000 years.

Those two above events – the establishment of Israel in 1948 and Jerusalem reunited under Jewish Rule in 1967, I believe are fulfillments of biblical prophecy and set the stage for the return of Jesus. But there are two other events that must take place before Christ returns and one just happened within the last three years.

THE RISE OF THE SANHEDRIN

Please turn with me to **Matthew 23:37-39**: *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”*”

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Now who is Jesus talking to? The Church? No. Is He talking to Jerusalem? Not necessarily. Is He speaking to Israel? No. To all the Jews in the world? No. While Jesus is making clear that He won't come back until He is welcomed as the Messiah in Jerusalem, I want you to see something else. Jesus is

not merely referring to the Jews; He is referring to their leadership. He is referring to the Sanhedrin. The Council of the 71 who stood in the tradition of Moses and the 70 elders (Numbers 11:6). These were leading Pharisees, and Sadducees who ruled over the Jewish people and upheld the Jewish law. How do we know that? Look now at the beginning of **Mt. 23**. Notice who Jesus is addressing – He says in verse 1, ***“The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ sit in the seat of Moses...but do not do what they do.”*** And then He gives a series of seven woes or judgments up on the leadership of Israel.

It isn't the Jewish people that are the problem according to Jesus. They are the children He longs to gather together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. The problem is their leadership. It was the Sanhedrin that kept the sheep away from the Good Shepherd. Look now at **Mt. 26:3**: ***“The chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill Him.”*** Now look at **Mt. 26:57, 59**: ***“Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled...The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin*** (“council” in some English versions but in the original Greek it is “the Sanhedrin”) ***were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death.”***

Who wanted Jesus killed? The Jewish people? No. Rather, it was the Sanhedrin. And it was the Sanhedrin that found Jesus guilty of blasphemy and because of this verdict the vast majority of Jewish people to this day believe Jesus is not the Messiah. And Jesus says you will not see me again until that verdict is reversed.

But this body, known as the Great Sanhedrin that met adjacent to the Temple was driven from Jerusalem in 70 AD after the Roman armies ransacked and desecrated the Temple and destroyed much of Jerusalem. And it was formally disbanded in 400 AD at their last meeting in Tiberias. So how can the Sanhedrin recognize Jesus as Lord if they no longer exist?

Well, they're back! While there had been a few attempts throughout history to revive this historic Jewish religious and legal body, all had failed. That is until three years ago, when Israeli National News reported on October of 2004 the following: “A unique ceremony - probably only the second of its kind in the past 1,600 years - is taking place in Tiberias today: The launching of a Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish-legal tribunal in the Land of Israel.”

Amazingly, the unique Jewish religious body of the Sanhedrin was reestablished October 2004 in Tiberias, the place of its last meeting 1,600 years ago. Composed of 71 orthodox rabbis and scholars of various backgrounds this new Sanhedrin received permission from the Israeli government to pray (in groups of ten) on the Temple mount two months later in December of '04. Since then, it has met in Jerusalem on a monthly basis. They now even have their own website (www.theSanhedrin.org) which reveals their goal of not only being the Jewish authority on religious matters but they have set out to reinstate the Passover sacrifice and to rebuild the Temple! In fact, they now have the foundation stone, the garments, and the vessels to reestablish the Temple rituals prescribed by the Torah. They are just waiting for a place to rebuild the Temple.

THE TEMPLE WILL BE REBUILT

And that leads us to the fourth sign concerning Israel. There is the nation Israel, there is the capital Jerusalem, there is the Sanhedrin, but there still needs to be a Temple. Please look now at **Mt. 24:15**. Jesus speaking of the signs which precede His return says, “*So when you see standing in the holy place, ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel – let the reader understand*” (in other words – PAY ATTENTION). To what is the prophet Daniel referring?

In Daniel’s prophecy (**Dan. 9:25-27**) the Temple of the Jews is desecrated by an unrighteous enemy of God. This prophecy was partly fulfilled by Antiochus IV Epiphanes who desecrated the Jewish Temple by slaughtering a pig in the Holy of Holies and by erecting an altar to the Greek god Zeus. His abominations triggered the Maccabean revolt. But Jesus speaks of another desecration. Some point to what happened when the Romans desecrated the temple in 70 AD. The Romans not only desecrated the Temple, they tore it down. Jesus goes on to say in verses 21-31, “*For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now – and never to be equaled again. If those days had been cut short, no one would have survived...* And there will be signs in the heavens (“*the sun and moon will be darkened, the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.*”) and then Christ shall come on the clouds in the sky. So while the Roman desecration of the Temple and its destruction is a partial fulfillment, it is only a precursor. For the end did not come at that time. So if the temple is to be desecrated once more, there must be another Temple; a Third Temple.

The first was built by Solomon but destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. The second was rebuilt during the time of Nehemiah and then expanded and remodeled under King Herod the Great but destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. The third is yet to be rebuilt and will be desecrated by the final world ruler, commonly referred to as the Antichrist, and revealed as the beast in Revelation 13.

THE FINAL WORLD RULER

Only a little more than sixty years ago, the world witnessed the horrors of what an evil powerful leader can do in the likes of Adolph Hitler and Nazi Germany. He almost succeeded in wiping out the Jews and taking over the world. Today with increased technology and power, it is not hard to see how given another chance, an evil world leader would succeed in taking over the world. The Bible warns of this final evil world leader. And the Bible says the nations will freely give him power. He will be indwelt by Satan himself and then he will make war against the saints - both Christian and Jew.

The world could not survive another Hitler. And it won’t without God’s intervention. And that’s why we are warned to watch for the signs; because God will intervene. He will intervene with His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus came as a suffering servant and lamb the first time. The second time He will come as a Reigning King and Mighty Lion.

We are living in the last days. There is only *one more time* for the rebuilding of the Temple, only *one more time* for the coming of a world leader consumed with world domination and control, and only *one more time* for Jesus Christ to come to Jerusalem and to establish His Kingdom. *Only one more time...*

So on this Advent, may we make ready the way of the Lord and as we watch for the signs, may we rejoice, for our redemption draws near! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!