

**ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA**

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

Scripture: Various

*"2011 and Counting..."*

**MERRY NINTH DAY OF CHRISTMAS AND HAPPY NEW YEAR!**

Yes, we are still in the season of Christmas. There are twelve days of Christmas, not one as the outside world would have us believe. This is also the first Sunday of the New Year. We have entered 2011 and many like to talk about new beginnings and New Year's resolutions. While there is nothing wrong with such talk, I am not one for making resolutions because they often don't work. What we need is life change not resolutions, and the only way we can have life change is by growing in our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

And when it comes to life transformation, it's understanding how our lives fit in the bigger picture of God's plan for our world. Everyone is interconnected. We are the product of everyone who has gone before and we are the forbearers of those who are coming after us. Moreover, everyone is assigned a different era to live in, a different cultural context, etc. The problem is that often we lose sight of the bigger picture and we just live from day to day, and week to week, and year to year not keeping God's ultimate plan for humanity in mind and how our lives relate to it.

What exactly is this bigger picture? What is God's ultimate plan for our world? The Return of Jesus Christ and the establishment of His Kingdom on earth. Some people like to ask in frustration, "What is the world coming to?" I'll tell you what our world is coming to: It is coming to Jesus.

**BE ALERT AND WATCH**

Jesus tells us that we are to be living with His Kingdom in mind. His first words to begin His ministry were *"Repent for the kingdom of God is near."* What is true about the Kingdom of God? Well, for starters, the Kingdom is wherever the King is. So the Kingdom of God is first and foremost the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus wants us to make Him King of our lives and when we do this the Holy Spirit enters us. Therefore, the Kingdom of God can be experienced in this world, and it can be shared and it can be anticipated. *But it will not be fully realized until Christ's Return.*

Now in the meantime, we are to live like sons and daughters of the King, and this means being aware of the signs of His return. The Apostle Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 5:2-6**: *"For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. **3**While they are saying, 'Peace and safety!'" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape. **4**But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; **5**for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; **6**so then*

*let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober."* So the coming of the Lord will take unbelievers by surprise because they won't be paying attention. But not so with believers. Paul says. *"But you are not of the darkness that the day should overtake you like a thief...so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober."*

Moreover, Jesus said multiple times in the Gospels that when it came to His Return we are to *"Watch and take heed."* He said in **Mt. 24:33** concerning the signs of His return, *"When you see all these things recognize that He (ie. Jesus) is right at the door."* So we will be able to see and recognize the signs of Christ's return.

Last Spring we began to look at the Signs of the Lord's return during my Lenten Bible Study. Many came out for the Study - on average 135 people with some nights reaching over 150. But many missed it and still many of those who came will tell you that the study just got their feet wet; they wanted to go deeper. So we will again be looking at the signs of Christ's Return in the coming weeks but specifically dealing with those signs that have already been fulfilled or are in the process of being fulfilled.

Why do we study Bible prophecy and the events they foretell? 1) It shows God's sovereign hand at work in the affairs of men. 2) It confirms the truth of His Word. 3) It keeps our lives in perspective. 4) It strengthens our faith. 5) It helps us combat false teaching and heresy.

So at the end of this series, we want to be able to see the big picture; God's overarching plan for the world; how Bible prophecy is being fulfilled in our day and be able to identify the signs already in our world; and how we can fulfill our God-given role in life before Christ returns.

## **WE ARE LIVING IN THE "LAST DAYS"**

Now before we look at specific signs and their Scriptural references, we need to understand the term *"Last Days."* Please turn with me to **Hebrews 1:1**: *"God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son,"*

Now when according to Hebrews did the last days begin? At the first coming of Jesus Christ. While I can't tell you how old human history or the planet is - I know some like to say 6000 years and others 10,000 years and still others longer - one thing is very clear - we are living the final age of history.

And isn't it interesting that despite the different calendars and dating systems that were used by different cultures and societies over the ages, in our present modern age, the entire world recognizes and adheres to a system that dates time from the time of our Lord's birth. This is 2011 AD (*Anno Domini Nostri* - "the Year of our Lord".) The entire world, regardless of culture or religion, uses this year designation. Many try to downplay the Christian significance of the date by using the term CE "(Current

Era") instead of AD but who are they kidding? We are counting from the time of Christ's first coming! A time and age designation more universally recognized than in any age prior.

Now when looking at the various signs that will precede Christ's return and there are literally hundreds of them, they can be divided into seven main categories: 1) Israel 2) Society in general 3) World Government 4) the Global Economy and Technology 5) World Religion 6) The Church and 7) Nature - concerning the latter recall Jesus words, "*There will be earthquakes, and in various places plagues and famines; there will be terrors and great signs from heaven.*" (Lk. 21:11)

## **THE SIGN OF ISRAEL**

I want to begin this morning by looking at the signs related to the nation of Israel. Recall that it is with the people of Israel that God made several covenants. God made a covenant with Abraham that through his descendants all the nations of the world would be blessed (Gen. 12). This covenant extended to Abraham's son Isaac, and then Isaac's son, Jacob. Jacob would be renamed "Israel" by God and his twelve sons' descendants became the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The Twelve Tribes became the people of Israel and after He delivered them from slavery in Egypt, God made a covenant with Moses and the people of Israel that they would be His special treasure and possession, a kingdom of priests and His chosen nation to reflect His light to the rest of the world (Ex. 19). The nation of Israel then became the kingdom of Israel and while David was king, the Lord made a covenant with him (2 Sam. 7) that promised that His throne would be forever (this comes about through the birth of the Messiah, Jesus Christ). Decades after God made this covenant, David's kingdom fell into civil war and split into two kingdoms – Israel to the north, and Judah to the south. Centuries later, both kingdoms were conquered - Israel by Assyria in 722 BC and Judah by Babylon in 586 BC. Those exiles from Judah after the Babylonian conquest became known as *Jews*. So the modern day descendents of Israel are the Jewish people. Recall that since Jesus was a descendant of David through his mother Mary, He is descendant of the tribe of Judah (Rev. 5:5).

Prophecy scholars often call Israel, God's prophetic time clock. Why? What happens to Israel sets up the rest of the world for the return of Christ. Jesus said that He is coming back to Jerusalem and to Israel (Mt. 23:37; 24:15-17). The Bible talks about a time at the end of the age when the nation of Israel will be surrounded and invaded by the world's armies (Zech. 12, 14). The problem was that for the longest time there was no nation of Israel. The Romans under General and later Emperor Titus destroyed the Jewish Temple and Jerusalem in 70 AD and the Jews were scattered throughout the world in the ensuing years. Not until 1948, did the Jews have a homeland they could again call their own. But it wasn't just a place for them to start anew and live after the evils of the Holocaust, it was the original land God had given to Abraham!

The truth is that it is hard for Christ to return to a place where His covenant people are not living. So the birth of the nation of Israel is the greatest sign of the modern age that we are getting closer to

Christ's second coming. Now while we will look at this in greater detail next week, let me give you one example of a specific prophecy as it pertains to the nation Israel, that has been fulfilled in our generation.

### **OUT OF THE "LAND OF THE NORTH"**

In our Old Testament lesson from **Jeremiah 31:7-8**, we read that in the last days the following will happen concerning Israel: *"For thus says the Lord, "Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and shout among the chiefs of the nations; proclaim and give praise, and say, ' O Lord, save Thy people, the remnant of Israel. I will bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the ends of the earth. Among them will be the blind and the lame, expectant mothers and women in labor; a great throng will return.*

This same prophecy is found in **Jeremiah 16:13-14**: *"However, the days are coming," declares the Lord, "when men will no longer say, 'As surely as the Lord lives, who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt,' but they will say, 'As surely as the Lord lives, who brought the Israelites up out of the land of the north and out of all the countries where he had banished them.' For I will restore them to the land I gave their forefathers."*

If you take a globe and you put your finger on Jerusalem and go north do you know where you end up? You will pass through Lebanon and Syria and then on through Turkey, but you end up in Russia. At the beginning of the 20th century, the vast territories of the Russian Empire hosted the largest Jewish population in the world with 5.5 million Jews. Due to persecution some 1.7 million emigrated to the US during the years of 1890-1920. But still over 3 million remained. In fact, I came across an old November 22, 1976 Time Magazine Article entitled *"Soviet Jews: Israel wants them all."* The article spoke of Israel's desire and effort to get the Kremlin to allow more Jews to emigrate from the Soviet Union to Israel. Although 125,000 Jews had been allowed to emigrate up until that time, the Soviet Union was in no mood to grant more requests.

How would these Jews be able to return to Israel? Through the fall of communism and breakup of the former Soviet Union. As a result of new found freedom, the floodgates opened and over 1 million Jews from the former Soviet Republics emigrated to Israel between 1990 and 2005! They now make up 20% of Israel's current Jewish population of 5.5 million.

It should also be noted that following World War 2, the highest number of Jews who came to Israel were from Eastern Europe which is also north of Israel. So you can see that this is a fulfillment of the Biblical prophecies found in Jeremiah 31:7-8 and 16:13-14! It is one more sign that the world is getting closer to Christ's return. Next week, we will study further the signs of Bible prophecy that are being fulfilled in the modern day restoration of the nation of Israel. Let us pray...