

**Sermon by The Rev. Deacon Annie Fritschner  
15 November 2009**

**1 Samuel 1:4-20e**

**Daniel 12:1-3**

**Psalms 16**

**Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18) 19-25**

**Mark 13:1-8**

*In April 1966, Time Magazine shocked the world with a provocative cover story entitled, "Is God Dead?"<sup>1</sup> The three words brought out into the open something that the church had been dealing with for a while as America underwent changes from an era of Eisenhower conservative to Kennedy liberal and church attendance continued to decline.*

*The article was balanced in its approach to answers; some theologians straightforwardly articulated that God was dead, had always been dead and would always be dead. Some discussed their concerns about how the church needed to change to make God more relevant.*

*Then there were those who said that God was very much alive. Included in this group was Billy Graham: 'For uncounted millions, faith remains as rock-solid as Gibraltar. Evangelist Billy Graham is one of them. "I know that God exists because of my personal experience," he said. "I know that I know him. I've talked with him and walked with him. He cares about me and acts in my everyday life."' A final view of the spectrum was offered by Yale's protestant chaplain William Sloan Coffin: "A girl said to me the other day, 'I don't know whether I'll ever believe in God, but Jesus is my kind of guy.' "*

*Her comment is very astute and very challenging because today's Gospel reading describes the tumult that will occur when the Temple in Jerusalem is destroyed and God's existence is deeply questioned. We are confronted with the God of the Sadducees that is temple-based and worshipped through blood sacrifices and proscribed methods, and Jesus' radical new way to worship God, which is by loving God with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength *in the world*.*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,835309-5,00.html>

*And I wonder if, in my daily life, in our daily lives, whether Jesus really is our kind of guy.*

*Jesus' apocalyptic remarks make references to the wars and earthquakes that will consume us as we make our choice of how we will worship God. Our struggles, our inner wars and doubt and questioning and even occasional hopelessness will be painful like birthpangs, but offer us the hope that when someone looks at our lives they will see God very much alive and relevant today.*

*The God of Israel was so utterly beyond human comprehension that devout Jews neither uttered nor wrote his name. As infinitely distant as God was, God gave us Jesus who brought and brings God infinitely near. Jesus is a faithful Jew and is intent on fulfilling all the law and the prophets but he is going to do it in a radically new way. Instead of engaging in debates on whether it is considered keeping the law if a crippled woman is healed on the Sabbath, Jesus as God incarnate gives us a new interpretation of an old law.*

*In Mark, Matthew and Luke Jesus quotes Deuteronomy of the Torah; "Hear, O Israel...Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates."<sup>2</sup>*

*This is the radical new law; not whether a woman can cut her hair or whether a candle can be lit on the Sabbath or the hundreds of other technical laws that were written in order to give Orthodox Jews a plan on how to live closer to God. Jesus is about the purpose of the law which is to love God and serve whoever is neighbor. Jesus is going to reinterpret and simplify the old law by living in a radically new way - he is going to teach and preach and heal in the name of God and is going to love all those who have been considered unworthy of love.*

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<sup>2</sup> This is the scripture passage written on small slips of paper in the phylactery tied on the wrists and foreheads of orthodox male Jews and in the mezuzah on lintels in Jewish homes.

***Jesus tells the ‘haves’ they will no longer be first but will be invited to be servants to the ‘have nots’ who now will have the revered place of honor. The distinctions of rank and property and tribe will no longer be valuable but will in fact be considered a hindrance in the new world where all are cherished and wanted.***

***This is bad news for the ‘haves’ because they are invested in the status quo - in keeping the balance tilted in their favor. By being ‘haves’ they make decisions affecting the ‘have nots’, and these decisions keep the balance of power, authority, wealth, connections, housing, education and membership in their own favor.***

***But Jesus’ new world order is different; the ‘haves’ will have a more difficult time getting into heaven than the ‘have nots’. The one who is lost will get God’s full attention and the 99 will be left on their own. Adulterous women will no longer be stoned to death but will be honored with Jesus’ time and attention, and the sick, maimed and mentally incapacitated will be healed - not shunned as sinners.***

***In the new world not bothering anyone and taking no more than our portion will no longer good enough. We will be called to get messy in what are considered acceptable practices in world. In the new world we will not tolerate the living conditions of 67 homeless Transylvania County school students, including 15 homeless elementary school students<sup>3</sup>; we will not need SAFE- our organization that assists victims of domestic violence and sexual assault- to field over 100 calls a week. In Jesus’ new world no child’s Christmas stocking will be empty.***

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<sup>3</sup> The homeless rate in Asheville and other parts of Buncombe County in 2007 was 28 per 10,000 residents, well above the state average of 13 per 10,000 and the national average of 22 per 10,000. *March 10, 2009 article in Asheville Citizen-Times*

Applying a similar average to neighboring Transylvania County would result in a homeless population of 74 at any given time (the state average, considered low for this part of the state, would yield 39 homeless individuals, and the national average would yield 66 people homeless on any given night.)

Reports from DSS, SAFE, Sharing House: All three agencies indicated there is a significant (and increasing) homeless population in Transylvania County, and that more of the homeless are women and children. *Interviews conducted in February 2009*

Report from Beth Branagan, Transylvania County Schools Social Worker: In 2008-2009, she tracked 133 children and youth who were homeless at some time during the school year. Of these, 37 were elementary students, 26 were middle school students, and 70 were high school students. In the first two months of 2009-2010, she identified 67 homeless children and youth; 15 in elementary school, 17 in middle school, and 35 in high school. *Report received October 2009*

*The radical new way of loving demands we believe in God's power to turn our hearts of stone into flowing lava of love, and for that love to burn away our selves so we may focus on neighbor. Through God's power the huge boulders of the temples we construct to human glory will be melted and destroyed and we will want to serve the 'have-nots' not because it is right and good but because we are alive in God only when we do.*

*Loving God with our whole heart and soul and mind and strength means enlargening our heart - not being satisfied with a small one but using all of it daily so it can grow larger, love more people, feel more tender, and fuel more compassionate behavior towards those we used to consider strangers - or even threats to our wellbeing.*

*The destruction of the temple that Jesus foresees is the radical change he dies for; but for the majority of faithful Jews then and I suspect Christians today, if our temple were destroyed, God would still be very much alive to us. In fact, we at St. Philip's worship down the road from our mother church of St. Paul's-in-the-Valley which was destroyed. Our faithful ancestors rebuilt the larger and stronger church we worship in and are responsible for today.*

*But what if our temple were more metaphorical? What if instead of losing our church we lost our spouse, our grandchild or child, our home, our job or our money? Would people be able to see God very much alive in us? In our most stressful, ugly times ---at the Emergency Department or in the four-hour traffic jam or grocery store--- could someone look at us and declare God is very much alive and at the center of our lives?*

*A few years ago, a friend shared with me a prayer that I strive to live into. It is called A Prayer from Zimbabwe, and if you have ever been there, you know life is lived very close to the earth and very close to death. Maybe that is partly why the prayer moves me so, but it is the radical simplicity of the words and the intentional life behind the words that grabs my soul. Here it is:*

*'I am a part of the fellowship of the unashamed. I have Holy Spirit power. The die is cast. I have stepped over the line. The decision has been made. I am a disciple of God's. I will not look back, let up, slow*

*down, back away or be still.*

*My past is redeemed. My present makes sense. My future is secure. I am finished and done with low-living, sight-walking, small planning, smooth knees, colorless dreams, tamed visions, worldly talking, cheap giving and dwarfed goals.*

*I no longer need pre-eminence, prosperity, position, promotion or popularity. I do not have to be right, first, tops, recognized, praised, regarded or rewarded. I now live by faith, lean on God's presence, walk by patience, am uplifted by prayer, and labor by Holy power.*

*My face is set, my gait is fast, and my goal is heaven. My road is narrow, my way rough, my Guide reliable, my mission clear. I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, deluded or delayed. I will not give up, shut up or let up. I will go on until Christ comes, and work until Christ stops me.*

*I am a disciple of Jesus.'*

*I cannot honestly pray this prayer in the present tense. The day I can pray it truthfully is the day I can enter into the radical new world in which Jesus lives. Yet every day, every moment, Christ invites us to live in this radical way of love.*

*The past two days, Julie Heinitsh, Bo Peep Wright, Rob, Maria and I, with Allison Stewart at the Youth Table, attended our 88<sup>th</sup> Diocesan Convention. Julie was elected to the Diocesan board of Fiscal Ministries and we were treated to an amazing Power Point created by Maria (with Max's help) and music found by Rob that described our Diocesan Strategic Plan. The theme for the plan is "Engage, Collaborate, Transform". Bishop Taylor is very clear in his expectations of us as Christians and of us as congregations; we are to engage with other congregations (Episcopal or not) and share our strengths, gifts and talents.*

*We are to collaborate - or co-labor - in issues affecting the world. And we are to allow our hearts and lives to be transformed by the radical power of Jesus' love and thereby transform the world around us. It was a motivating presentation and the plan itself is exciting,*

*measurable and visionary. It is based on the shared truth that with and through Jesus' radical love we can and will change the world.*

*I know that Episcopalians as radicals might not be consistent, but I stand here today on the shoulders of some brave women and men who not only believed it was wrong to keep women from being ordained - but they acted on it. And my immigrant paternal great grandparents had a radically new vision for their family that drove them not just out of Ireland but towards Ellis Island and the statue of Liberty's sacred invitation; "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door." My ancestors trusted in the radical love of this inscription.*

*But do you have and I have to throw down our nets and leave our families in order to follow Jesus? Can we live a safe and comfortable middle class life and say "Yes!" to Jesus' invitation to live radical love? Is every comfortable "have" challenged like the rich young man or can we live a good and God-honoring life without giving up everything we own? Can we play it safe and still say 'yes' to the Christ? Asked another way, do we want to adopt Jesus' principles but only as long as they don't upset our daily lives?*

*Jesus tells us it will be hard - that we cannot have two masters. He repeatedly reassures and challenges us that faith in Christ will heal us of our need to hold onto the old. But Jesus is clear that if we choose to say "Yes!" to Christ we will not live our lives as our own.*

*Trust me when I say I never ever thought I would be able to walk into a homeless day shelter to offer myself as gift. I am a coward. I have a tender heart but I am not one who lives to confront the uncomfortable or painful.*

*The first day I walked into AHOPE, the day shelter for the homeless in Asheville, I was not ordained and I didn't have a collar to kind of hide behind as though it would offer me safety or respect. I walked in and there were two of the most gigantic men I have ever seen in my life. I swear it must have been BIG HUGE Man Day at AHOPE. One was white and one was black and both of them had shaved heads, one of whose*

*head was pierced - the other's was tattooed. They were like refrigerators! I remember putting my head down, looking at my feet, and saying to myself, "My mother wouldn't be happy with me being here. I'm a debutant!"*

*My point is that I cannot do what I do and go where I go without Christ alive in my soul. And if any of us were to try to serve in Christ's name without a strong faith and active prayer life, we will be destroyed like the temple, brought down and crushed into rubble and sand.*

*As your deacon I am charged with bringing the good news of Jesus Christ outside the temple to the people who feel unworthy or unloved, and to bring the needs of the world and our wounded brothers and sisters into the church. At St. Philip's I certainly am not the only one engaged in community service to God's children/our neighbors. So it is with tremendous gratitude and hope that I stand amongst you at the end of the service after the priests have left. I am part of you and you are part of me and I turn purposefully to celebrate the action of leaving the temple so that together we take our love out of the church walls into the community of the broken, seeking, wondering and lonely. Together we invite these new neighbors to join us in the temple to be fed with the word, the prayers, the body and the blood - to be fed with the ultimate love of Christ that none of us can replicate but only point to in our limited ways. We serve together in our unique ways, striving to be witnesses to the living God.*

*And so my sisters and brothers in Christ, let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds... encouraging one another... serving with gladness and singleness of heart. Amen.*