Matthew 24:1-11  Ominous Portents

Last week, walking outside, I heard that funny (and yet somehow, haunting) sound of geese flying south. After a moment searching for the familiar v-formation, I saw them far above me. But then a strange thing happened that I had never seen before: the formation broke up, they started flying in circles, as though confused and looking for markers to help them find their way; and then, the birds separated into two circling groups. This continued for five minutes or more, and I tell you, I was alarmed for them. Could some odd ecological thing have happened that caused them to lose their direction—like the sick or confused whales that swim onto the beach, or bees that can’t find their way back to the hive? Well, after a time, the geese did head off south, but still not in formation, and not as one group but two. Let me confess, I think the flora and the fauna of this planet are facing many problems that make me worry about their survival, and ours: too many to name, but I know you worry with me.

The end of the world. That’s what I was thinking about watching the geese. I knew I was preaching from this text, so ominous signs of the end were already on my mind. The “close of this age,” the disciples say in our passage. It’s popular topic of conversation; the times we aren’t afraid of it, we are fascinated by it. The
airwaves are filled with the observations of televangelists and pundits who see the end of civilization in every event—the breakdown of morality and the unraveling of our society. The apocalypse, the signs are all around us, they say. And they may be right, but I think, right about the wrong things. We just had elections, and for some, the results may seem to be the end of the world. Or if not the results, then maybe the campaigns themselves. It was distressing to watch the campaigns and hear the candidate’s complaints about the opponent or the other party; to hear exaggerations surely no one would think to be true; and then, after reflection, to understand they were lies told to play on the fears of the voters— or to create fear.

It is that same practice of certain ministers and church leadership and the boards of some religious organizations, those who promote themselves by selling fear. Verse 11 calls them “false prophets.” Maybe they really believe what they are selling. We can assume their sincerity. But the thing is, that is not what Jesus does; even as we read Matthew 24, and find allusions to terrifying events— even so, Jesus is not selling fear.

The disciples come to Jesus and ask what will be the signs, when will these things happen? It’s an interesting scene, Jesus and his friends on the Mount of Olives, a high point outside the city where they can look down on the shining
temple, where Jesus had just told them not one stone would be left standing. It must have been sobering, following on the heels of his denouncement of the scribes and Pharisees in chapter 23. We can’t understand these apocalyptic words of Jesus, or the rest of this chapter, unless we remember how he had called them out, condemned the self-serving wickedness of those religious leaders of Jerusalem; remember “Woe to you, hypocrites”? And how from the steps of the temple he had accused them that this house of theirs was forsaken and desolate? Forsaken indeed, for now, in our reading, Jesus has left the house of worship. Jesus withdrawing from the temple is a final act of judgment upon selfishness and unrighteous pride.

So, what are these signs, when will these things happen? Just look at what Jesus prophesies, the temple destroyed, wars, famines, earthquakes, hatred, betrayal, false teachings; and then later in the chapter, that the sun and the moon will no longer shine, and stars will fall out of the sky. Scary stuff, and many religious cults have come into existence preaching such terrors; many politicians have come to power using this same language of fear.

But that’s not us, is it? We aren’t in a cult; we can see through the lies, can’t we? We deal in the truth, right? But then, perhaps we are confused, sometimes,
flying in circles, unless we can answer this question: what is the truth we know? It isn’t an easy answer. I mean, we see the signs Jesus speaks of, they are all around us; most are signs we’ve seen every day of our lives. There are wars, seemingly everywhere, nations rising up against nations, as they always have; kings and presidents and tribal lords clamoring for battle and not for peace-because it’s good for the resume. These and the others are not new or unexpected signs, but someone will keep on telling us they are omens of evil; we keep being reminded how the world is different from the way we remember, and different from what we hoped it would be. It is so easy for any of us to be afraid of the tribulation and the hatred of verse 9, and the falling away and betrayals of verse 10. We fear the suffering and the uncertainty, and the possibility of becoming a people without voice or power. And so, some of us become easy pickings for the false prophets who come to steal away the fearful. But I believe this gospel word is preparing us for the fear before it happens; it is God’s grace ahead of time, pointing us to some definitive and certain truth.

What is that truth? I think, just this: the strength and the surety of the fellowship of the faithful. That is, the presence of God among us; and the utter importance of the other person. Verses 4, 5, 11 tell us to be careful that we are not
led astray, that we do not become separated from one another- out of fear, or by believing the lies that sound so plausible. “Do not be led astray,” Jesus says. These signs of the apocalypse do seem ominous, threatening, but behind them is God’s promise. There are a lot of things out there that can kill us, so much in the world that can harm; so many people who hate or want to control us, but these portents are God’s warning to us, not to turn away from one another, to be encouraged and to take comfort and strength from each other. “Do not be led astray.” Stay connected. And stay devoted to the cause of Jesus Christ that we discover in acts of kindness and friendship.

We are surrounded by enemies. To hear the campaign speeches of the past months, and the oratory on talk radio, it’s all those people different from us- they are the ones out to get us, trying to break into our country, trying to deform the church, trying to destroy our way of life. To use our scripture as metaphor, they all want to tear down the temple of our culture.

But who are “they”? This is where Jesus disagrees with simplistic punditry and easy answers. The “they” of verse 9 are not different from us, after all. “They” are not other nations or religions, not outside groups or strange
philosophies. To be “delivered over,” as verse 9 puts it, is always an inside job. “They” come from among us. Think of the scribes and Pharisees of chapter 23-they are the same race and religion as Jesus and his disciples, and yet Jesus considers them enemies of God’s goodness and truth; and notice verse 5, those who come in the name of the Lord and claim to speak the truth of Christ-they are believers in Jesus as are we, but corrupted believers who try to lead astray, and separate us from the truth and from those we love. Who are “they”? They are the false prophets of verse 11, who arise out of our midst, who come sounding like us, sounding like they care for us; who speak with such assurance and passion, but they come only to lead us away, into the world of lies. They divide us into distrustful groups, and thus maintain their power.

So, “take heed” Jesus says in verse 4; watch for the signs that are everywhere and come at us everyday. But let us see the truth about the signs, that they call us to be one people, and not divided into us versus them. To learn to be friends. To be strong when trouble falls upon us; to be faithful and to tell the truth, to love one another, and to share all things with one another. To pray, to help, to forgive, to remember that the God who loves is with us. So that we need not fear,
but can stand firm and hopeful in this community of God’s mercy and human charity and friendship.