

Sixth Sunday after Michaelmas  
St. Matthew 24:15-28

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

In 168BC, the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes IV led an attack on Egypt. He was one in a line of kings who ruled a third of the empire that Alexander the Great had created; after his death, his empire was split into smaller kingdoms, one of which was ruled by the Seleucids. Anyway, Antiochus was blocked before entering Alexandria by a single Roman envoy. This envoy, drew a line in the sand, encircling Antiochus, and warned him that if he crossed the line without a pledge to withdraw from Egypt and Cyprus, he was effectively declaring war on Rome. Antiochus decided to withdraw.

However, while he was busy in Egypt, a revolt arose in Jerusalem. A rumor had spread that Antiochus had died in his campaign against Egypt. A deposed high priest took this opportunity to gather an army and sack Jerusalem. The high priest that Antiochus had put into the office fled the city to save his life. As the army found out, however, Antiochus did not die, and he retaliated in 167BC, restoring his chosen high priest and killing many Jews.

Additionally, Antiochus outlawed the Jewish religion and rituals. He set up a statue of Zeus in the temple and sacrificed swine on the altar. So was fulfilled the words of the prophet Daniel: "And from the time that the daily sacrifice is taken away, and the abomination of desolation is set up, there shall be one thousand two hundred and ninety days." (Daniel 12:11) The right sacrifices were taken away and an abominable sacrifice set up in their places. It was the abomination of desolation. For this reason, many equate Antiochus with the eleventh horn on the beast of Daniel's prophecy.

Jesus reiterates Daniel's prophecy in today's text. "Therefore when you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains." Daniel mentions 1290 days, which is 3 ½ years. If we play around with those numbers a little, like multiplying them by 10, that makes 35 years, and 35 years after Jesus was crucified is about the time that the Roman emperor Titus sacked Jerusalem. Jesus predicts the attack.

Josephus this historian documents Titus' attack of Jerusalem in his annals. He recounts the bloody massacre that occurred and the destruction that ensued. The temple itself was destroyed—another abomination of desolation. Titus began his attacks in AD67; Jesus warned that the inhabitants would be rushed when trying to flee. And many did flee again when the temple and Jerusalem were destroyed in AD70. "Flee to the hills," Jesus told them; and many did and survived.

Some 430 years later, there was a certain man who was sent to Rome by his wealthy parents in order to complete his education. It had been a generation since the last emperor in Rome had been deposed by the barbarian horde, and the city itself had become but a shadow of its former self. Disgusted by the state of the city, the man fled into the forest to live life and pray as a hermit.

This man had gained a reputation for holiness and had gathered a following. Before his death in 547, he had founded a dozen monastic communities. All the while, Rome was collapsing. It was more than simply an economic crisis, but social and cultural crises resulted from the collapse as well. It turned into a veritable dark age. In every place, the collapse had devastating effect, except in these monastic communities. There, life thrived as civil society continued within those community walls.

These communities didn't keep their work to themselves, though. Anyone who came to the communities were catechized as well as taught practical life skills. These communities served as bastions of civilization, serenity, and sanity in a world gone mad. The name of the man who founded this way of monastic life? Benedict.

He lends his name to a political idea that has been making rounds among some in the American

political scene who identify with libertarianism—small l. The Benedict Option, as it is known, would be a response to flee to the hills as the rest of the society goes mad. However, a tenet of this option that is in conflict with what St. Benedict created is that modern adherents would take this option and live in complete isolation, if they could. These people feel so hedged in by the world around them, that it seems as if the only option left for them is to remove themselves from the picture and live in seclusion (maybe with each other) as the world outside plummets into a political dark age.

It is, perhaps, an idea borrowed from Ayn Rand and her novel Atlas Shrugged, where a man named John Galt convinces people—“prime movers,” as Rand would describe them—disgusted with the rules and regulations that are being set up by the government to strike. They did so by leaving the lives they had built for themselves, destroying their over-regulated businesses, and setting up in his secluded enclave in the mountains of Colorado, Galt’s Gulch. There they retreated in the hopes of rebuilding American society on the ruins of the left-leaning, more socialist government. While not wholly true to the Benedictine monastic lifestyle, many are looking to what Rand wrote and positing the idea that it may be time to consider doing the same or similar, and calling it the Benedict Option.

And who can blame them? Much of what was going on in the novel appears to be happening right now. The culture around us appears to be embracing an egalitarian mediocrity which Galt and his friends rebelled against. Life imitating art.

Perhaps you feel the same way, especially in regard to a sense of an erosion to the freedom of religion, guaranteed by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. While the world has always been opposed to the Gospel, in your lifetime, you haven’t seen the opposition so overt as it has become in these latter days. Christians are openly ridiculed, while it seems that others, especially Muslims, are praised or feared for retaliation if they happen to be ridiculed. In some places, Christians are even killed for expressing the faith, losing their heads to the cheers and praises of many.

Friends, we find ourselves living in a time where it appears as if there is another abomination of desolation being erected. It’s not that swine sacrifice is taking place on our altars. For the most part, our churches are not being destroyed by a conquering army, though in some places, that certainly is happening. However, Christianity and Christians as a whole are no longer respected, and the Church is no longer seen as a bastion of civility and service that it once was hailed as. The walls around are crumbling, and it feels as if there is no option left but to flee to the hills.

But, there is nothing new under the sun. Jesus warned his followers—and in turn, warns you—that the world hates Him, and since it hates Him, you can rest assured that it hates you, too. (cf. John 15:18) And as the world turns, there will be times when the Church is revered or respected for what She is and does, and times when She will be outlawed and seen as a threat to society. No matter how the Church is received by the world, though, the world will always hate those who are a part of the Church. But, in every instance, the Church has survived because of who Her head is.

The rub in these times of increasing spiritual distress is to look for answers in places where you should not seek those answers. Research is indicating that right now, in these times, people are leaving churches in droves as persecution and hardship increases from the world outside. In many cases, those leaving were Christian in name only. While the going is good, they stay in a safe place, but when the persecution comes, they begin to question whether or not they are in the right place. They show their true colors, being nominal Christians at best, and making a confession contrary to the one they had been taught (if they were taught at all). These so-called Christians then seek out answers as they recognize a need for a spiritual answers. “For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive...”

That’s why Jesus warns His hearers not to look for the Christ in the wilderness or in the inner rooms. Jesus did not promise to be there for you, and if He did not promise to be there for you, then it is fruitless and even dangerous to look for Him there. Dangerous? Yes, because if you go looking for

the Christ where He is not to be found, then what you find there will not be Jesus, but something—someone—more sinister.

That's why Jesus tells you exactly where He can be found. Every word of the Scriptures points to Him—they are Him. He tells you that He is present in the waters of Holy Baptism, where you received Him as you were washed and sanctified and made a son of His Father in heaven. He tells you that He is present in His body and blood as you are given a morsel of bread to eat and a sip of wine to drink in the Sacrament of the Altar. Jesus promises His presence here in this place as two or more are gathered together in His name. And in these means, where He is present for you, His presence for you is for your forgiveness, strengthening of faith, life, and salvation.

In today's text, Jesus also tells you where to look for Him. He doesn't mention His Word or Sacraments or in places where you are gathered with others in His name. But Jesus speaks of His return, following His crucifixion and ascension. "For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be." Jesus tells you that He will be found in His return as Judge on the clouds of heaven, just as men from Jerusalem saw Him rise. (cf. Acts 1:11)

The abomination of desolation has come. Antiochus and Titus fulfilled those prophecies. Now, while things may come that are comparable to them, there is no prediction to be fulfilled and serve as cause to flee to the hills. For now, Jesus tells His people to be the Church, and He will be Her Head.

All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:18-20)

"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned." (Mark 16:15-16) Jesus is the Church's Head. He is your head, dear Baptized. And He is with you always, to the end of the age. This is His promise to you, come what may, because you are Baptized and believe—a faith given to you from the Father in heaven—you are saved.

So, it is tempting to want to pick up roots and flee this world gone mad. But remember what the real Benedict Option is. Yes, stay true to your calling in Christ, and you will receive the crown of life. (cf. Revelation 2:10b) But don't turn away those who may come to you seeking from you some sort of calm and peace because you are in Christ. "[A]lways be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear." (1 Peter 3:15b) "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:16)

Here, within these walls, is your commune. Here, Jesus promises to be for you, because here is where He comes to you in His Word and Sacraments. Here, at the font, or one just like it, Jesus claimed you as His own brother. Here at the altar, Jesus joins Himself to you as you take into your mouths the very body and blood of your Savior. And here, Jesus invites those of the world gone mad to come and receive a peace that the world cannot give (cf. John 14:27), a peace that passes all understanding. (cf. Philippians 4:7) And He uses you to make that happen.

It's His work, though, make no mistake about it. The light that you shine is the light of Christ. Jesus Christ is the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome. It is the light that overcomes the darkness of your world, and shines toward the hope that you have for Jesus return to be your Judge. Then, Jesus Christ will light the world in His righteous judgment. But you who are in Him need not fear the verdict, for you have already heard it, and hear it week after week: not guilty; you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.