

Sermon – November 14, 2021  
“He sat down at the right hand of God”  
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Mark 13:1-8

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words, that their sharing may become a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to abundant life and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word today. Amen*

Good morning! The weather is starting to feel a lot like fall, isn't it? Let me begin this morning by celebrating a few items from this past week. Does anyone remember taking one of the Christmas cards from the altar earlier this year, some ten months ago? Do those who took a card remember that we were to put \$10 into the envelope each month and seek to be led by the Holy Spirit to find someone on this mission field in need to whom we would give our card before Christmas? Well, it is time to find those cards and get ready to deliver them to the person we discern God is leading us to. No one is keeping score on this, but I wanted to remind those of us who took this challenge that the time has arrived. May God richly bless our efforts.

The Good News Club continues to be a blessing with kids, volunteers, laughter, and new insights as we seek to share the Good News of Jesus with children in Northumberland Elementary School. We are planning a birthday party for Jesus on December 11<sup>th</sup> at Fairfields at 10 am. Plan to invite the kids in your life and come and enjoy a party for Jesus.

Our Charge Conference is done! There are still reports and papers to be filed, but we have our leadership, budget, and planning complete for another year and can now focus on our mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ who make disciples. Thanks to everyone for your willingness to be at work in the coming year for the kingdom of God.

Finally, we have Advent books on order for this year's Advent season. They are daily devotions that connect to the sermon for the Sundays of Advent. Everyone who uses one of the devotion books will daily read the scripture and supporting text together as a congregation. When the books arrive, we will put them in the fellowship hall (back of the sanctuary) with a donation jar and ask that you donate \$13 for a book. We procured enough books for one per family, so plan to get together each day of Advent and read God's word together throughout Advent. Hopefully, we will be able to encounter the gift of Jesus Christ in a new and exciting way as we read together this

Christmas season. As a Charge, we plan to kick off Advent a little differently with a sunrise service at the Mallard Bay club house on Sunday, November 28<sup>th</sup>. Plan to come. It will be a short service and then we plan to gather at Fairfields UMC for breakfast.

Let's turn in our Bibles this morning to Ezekiel 11:19-23. This scripture passage describes a vision Ezekiel received about God's presence as Israel headed towards exile. Listen to the words from Ezekiel: "I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God. But as for those whose heart goes after their detestable things and their abominations, I will bring their deeds upon their own heads, says the Lord GOD. Then the cherubim lifted up their wings, with the wheels beside them; and the glory of the God of Israel was above them. And the glory of the LORD ascended from the middle of the city, and stopped on the mountain east of the city."

There is much in this text that is helpful as we look at our Gospel lesson. Notice that Ezekiel speaks words to the coming of hearts of flesh and the ability of Israel to obey God's statutes and ordinances. This is a future prophecy, a time when God's people will live in a God-honoring way. Notice that in this future time prophecy, the glory of the LORD goes out from the middle of Jerusalem and stops east of the city. As Israel has failed to follow God's statutes and ordinances, God will leave the city. God's presence will no longer be with Israel and they will go into exile.

This morning's Gospel reading starts with Jesus and the disciples coming out of the temple, and as they do, the disciples speak to Jesus about the structure of the temple. This is the temple that Herod built and it was considered one of the wonders of the world. The white marble stones that the disciples spoke of were large white stones covering the building. In addition, the front of the temple was covered with plates of polished gold, so that when the rising sun's rays struck the plates, it was said that the temple shone with the intensity of the rising sun. The temple was a large beautiful structure of many connected buildings, all covered with white stones. When Jesus' disciples comment on this beautiful structure, they are not only commenting on the buildings but on what they represent in the nation of Israel. This structure and the worship there was how they defined themselves, as those who worshiped the one true God through sacrifice.

Jesus' response that all of the stones of this impressive structure would be thrown down must have startled this group of disciples. The center of the nation was to be destroyed. This news was so shocking that it will take a while before the inner group of disciples approaches Jesus to ask for details about this prophecy. Notice that when they come to ask about his prophecy, Jesus is sitting on the Mount of Olives east of the temple looking at the temple. Jesus is God in the flesh,

looking at this structure that was set up to give God glory through sacrifice. Jesus has just finished trying to convince the religious leaders of the temple that he is God. Jesus has talked with the Jewish leadership, taught the people, healed many, and yet they have rejected him and are seeking to kill him. We should realize that Jesus left the temple and has gone up the Mount of Olives east of Jerusalem as Ezekiel prophesied centuries before. God in the flesh now sits and waits on this hill east of the city. The presence of God, in Jesus, has gone out from the city and waits on the hill.

As Jesus waits, the inner group of disciples comes to him to try to learn more about these devastating, unbelievable words Jesus has spoken about the destruction of the temple, the destruction of the very center of the nation of Israel. This group comes to learn the time of this destruction and what will be the sign of its coming. They don't come to ask Jesus what will replace the temple or if there is something new to come, and so we should understand their question in the context of an end-of-time question. They have connected the destruction of the temple with the end of the world. Jesus gives them no clear date, and the signs he describes, earthquakes, famine, and wars, are all events that each generation thinks they witness in their own lifetime that mark the beginning of the end of time. Yet while these things do occur, we should note that they are not the sign of the coming of the end of times, but its beginning, and we should expect a long beginning. Those who are students of history may know that in 70AD, following Israel's uprising against Roman rule, Emperor Titus decreed that the temple was to be destroyed and all of its stones thrown down. The temple is destroyed and the system of sacrifice ends in Jerusalem. Key to this sacrificial system was the day of atonement, the time once a year when the high priest, with bells on the bottom of his robe and a rope tied to him, went behind the curtain decorated with cherubim, into the Holy of Holies to make atonement for the people with the blood of an animal. The disciples hear Jesus' words and they wonder how they will worship God and how atonement will be made for their sins if the temple is destroyed, and when this end of the age will come. Yet the atonement that comes with the blood of an animal for the people is not adequate, as it does not bring forgiveness of sin and healing to those whose hearts are inclined to sin. The temple is the place of worship where the priests stand all day at their work before God, never stopping or sitting down. And while the sacrifices offered are many, they never take away sins.

Jesus is sitting on the mountain east of Jerusalem looking at the magnificent sight of the temple with its white marble front and the great sheets of gold. He is God in the flesh sitting on the mountain east of Jerusalem. Jesus will go from this place on the mountain east of Jerusalem to be crucified outside of the city on a cross, to die, and to be placed in a tomb, and three days later to be raised from the dead. For a time, Jesus will appear to many and then he will ascend to heaven to sit

down at the right hand of God the Father. The disciples do not yet understand what Jesus will do and they do not understand how his actions will make the temple not needed because a more perfect sacrifice is coming. They are too focused on their understanding and not on God's unfolding plan.

The writer of Hebrews in chapter 11 does give us a clear picture of Jesus as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. We should see a contrast between the priests in the temple who stand all day every day, carrying out their duties, and Jesus, who after his sacrifice, sits down in heaven at the right hand of God the Father. The difference between these two groups is that Jesus' sacrifice is perfect. It is a single sacrifice, not for a sin but for sins. With Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, there is no longer any need for another or additional sacrifice. Jesus paid in full the price for all sins that separate people from God. Jesus is the great priest as he offers himself as a sacrifice excelling above all of the priests of the temple. This is the reason that Jesus sits at the right hand of God the Father. Jesus completed the act of sacrifice for sins for all time. His work as a priest is complete, and so instead of standing as the priests in the temple do while they work, Jesus' sacrifice is completed, and he sits as a sign of the completed sacrifice for all people.

Now we might ask, "Is Jesus just sitting there waiting for the end to come?" And the answer to that question is "no." Jesus intercedes for those who have put their faith in him to the Father from his place at the Father's right hand. The destruction of the temple that Jesus tells the disciples about is not a comment about the end of the world, but a new concept of a temple that is coming. The temple and the sacrificial system will give way to a better sacrifice that was to come, namely Jesus. Jesus' sacrifice eliminates the need for the sacrifice of animals and a temple for their offering to God. Jesus understood what he would do and become so that all people would be reconciled before God. No longer would believers need to fear when they come before God in the Holy of Holies in heaven, as Jesus' sacrifice has canceled our sin debt. Our sins are forgiven and remembered no more. When we come to the throne room of God on a path through the curtain that was opened by Jesus' flesh, we need have no fear because God does not see us and our sins, but sees Jesus and the sacrifice that was completed. It is in this manner that we have put on Christ. All of the beautiful stones and gold coverings of the temple have been removed and nothing but rubble remains. While the news of the temple's destruction mostly likely brought to the minds of the disciples the end of all things, it is a new beginning to which Jesus speaks, a new beginning bringing forgiveness of sins and the writing of God's laws onto our hearts with the needed strength through the Holy Spirit to live those laws. With our acceptance of Jesus' gift of salvation, God's laws are put in our hearts and on our minds through the action of the Holy Spirit, and we are transformed into new creatures without hard hearts, or hearts of stone.

Jesus, God in the flesh, fulfils the prophecy from Ezekiel not only by leaving the temple and so the presence of God leaves Jerusalem, but by resting on the mountain top east of the city for a few moments and gazing upon that which is passing away. This is God waiting for Israel to return from their sinful ways and return to Him. However, Israel does not turn and accept Jesus, and Jesus then surrenders to God's plan and is taken down into the valley to face death in our place and become the perfect sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins.

The disciples, when they hear Jesus' words about the temple's destruction, are concerned about the loss of the temple and not for the coming death of Jesus. They look for that which is passing away to sustain them. This is our challenge, not to focus on that which is passing away, but to realize that God is with us and our sins are forgiven and forgotten through Jesus's sacrifice. Too often we like the disciples cling to magnificent structures and empty routines and miss the living and loving God in our midst. Our response to the Gospel message found in Hebrews is to meet with each other, encourage each other daily, as long as it is today, and provoke one another to love and good deeds. Let me encourage each of us to seek to encourage those we worship with and those whom God places in our paths in the days and weeks to come. Too often church people seem to be more capable of provoking each other to frustration and conflict than encouraging each other, sharing loving acts, and doing good deeds. Our struggle in this life is to surrender what we want and seek instead to respond appropriately to Jesus' sacrifice by provoking each other to love.

Now I don't normally think of the word provoke in connection with acts of love. I understand "provoking" more as my ability to provoke another person to anger. I looked this word up in the Oxford English Dictionary and I discovered that there are two definitions. The first is "causing annoyance; irritating." That is the concept that I am more familiar with and I have a fair amount of experience achieving those results. The second definition is "giving rise to the specified reaction or emotion." We are clearly being pointed by text in the letter to Hebrews to this second definition and not the first. We are to seek to help each other give rise to love for one another and our neighbors. Given that I have already shared that my expertise lies more with the first definition and less with the second, I don't think that I am equipped to share the top ten ways to provoke one another to love. It is here that I think we must look to Jesus and ask ourselves, "How did Jesus provoke his disciples to love?" The answer to that question is that Jesus demonstrated extreme love as he offered himself up as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. The provocation Jesus used is that he loves others so much that he will sacrifice himself for them so that the world might be reconciled to God. That is provoking to love. This is then the first step in loving others, to sacrifice ourselves that another might be lifted up. We are not looking to become a sacrifice that is nailed to a cross, but are

called to set aside time each day to encourage another believer and those who have never heard of Jesus. Think for a minute what this church would look like if we decided to encourage one other person with whom we worship one time each day during the coming week. There would be twenty plus “provoking to love events” happening each day among our congregation and maybe more, because honestly, some of us are better provokers than others, that is, provoking to love. And if we start today and provoke others all week long there would be 7 times 20 or 140 plus love-provoking acts. Can we catch a glimpse of what a church that provokes its members to loving acts might look like? Can we realize how radical and attractive such a place would be to those who are outside of this congregation? Wouldn’t it be cool if people in this community referred to us as those “love-provoking Methodists”?

Now, before all of us run out and spend all afternoon provoking each other, let me share a bit of wisdom that I learned in a marriage communication improvement class Kay and I used to lead from time to time. The class was designed to help couples improve their communication skills. I learned a lot about the perspective of the receiving party from exercises we used in this class. Too often what one of the husbands considered as loving would be received as unloving by the wife. This is our struggle as we seek to provoke each other to love. Our provoking needs to be received as loving. With that said, let me encourage all of us to sacrifice some time this week and attempt to provoke another church member to love. Start by praying that the Holy Spirit will place a person on our heart to show God’s love to and that He will reveal to us what is loving for them. And then take a risk and try provoking each other to love. Next week, when we meet for worship during our sharing of joys and concerns, we will share our provoking experiences. And let me ask that if someone does reach out to provoke you to love, even if what they do is not very loving from your perspective, please be gracious and receive what they share. Receiving in love is also provoking to love.

Christ was the perfect sacrifice, and he is now sitting at God’s right hand as more sacrifices are now no longer needed. Our response to Christ’s sacrifice is to seek to provoke each other to love and good deeds. Pray, listen, act, and love each other, and then if you are willing, come ready to share our experiences next week. I think it would be a great sermon to have people share how they were loved by others and received love from others.

*Pray with me: Father God, send the Holy Spirit to guide us into acts of provoking love this coming week. Lord, give us fresh insights into how we might love others as you love us and then to have the courage to try to act on the stirring of our hearts. Lord, give us grace in all of our interactions with one another, now and forever more. Amen.*