

The Rev. Charlie Holt:

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, thank You for the gift of Your Word, where we are called to be witnesses and to proclaim Your name and testify for You in a world that is sometimes very topsy-turvy and turbulent. And so, we pray that You would help us to bear up and to manifest Your glory. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Thank you, Grace.

You probably all intuitively feel this, but there has been a 50-year decline in confidence in institutions.

And this is across the board, whether we're talking about government or even institutions of the school system, medical profession, and even organized religion.

Over the last 50 years, there has been a steady decline in confidence and faith by people in the institutions of our society.

Recent polls such as the Gallup and the Pew bear out. And it's interesting, they rank the institutional confidence of different people of different organizations and institutions. And who would you think would be the lowest?

Congress, right?

That would be 11 percent would be the current confidence level or faith in Congress to actually do anything. And the recent shutdown is a pretty good example of how well they're doing.

But then the highest is actually small business, which was interesting to me, that that consistently is where people do have some confidence. Big business, not so much. That's down on the low end. But I was encouraged to see organized religion in the top five at least.

So, you have small business and then the military and police officers and then the medical community and then organized religion is right there. But before we pat ourselves on the back too much, we're still in the mid 30

percent in terms of people's faith and confidence. I've had people tell me, "Well, I believe in God. I just don't believe in organized religion." I say, "Well, what would you like, disorganized religion?" Because we can specialize in that too if that helps. But one of the things that Jesus is trying to get across to His disciples is actually we probably shouldn't put our faith in the institutions of this world. That actually is a healthy way to think about the institutions of our society. Back in His day, one of the big institutions was organized religion. It was the temple complex.

And Herod had built during the 45 years of his reign, Herod the Great, an incredible monumental structure of the temple. And this was the place for the Jewish people to offer sacrifices to God, and it was beautifully adorned. But literally the stones were massive. You can still go to Jerusalem and visit the foundation of this temple. And I went there several years ago, and it is impressive. You look at the foundation stones, and they are literally carved square rectangular blocks that are the size of a school bus.

They are huge.

And that's what's called the wailing wall. When people go and they put prayers in the crevices of this foundation stones of the old temple complex dating back to zero BC, basically, 1 AD. And so, when the disciples were there with Jesus, they actually solved the structure.

When one of them commented, this is the way that it reads in our gospel, "When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another. All will be thrown down."

Twenty years later, that big, beautiful temple would be destroyed by the Romans. They would come into Jerusalem and sack the city. It was one of the most devastating sieges that was ever done. Many of the people of Jerusalem fled to a fortress on the Dead Sea called Masada, and they holed up in the fortress. And to this day, you can look down and you can see from the fortress of Masada the squares of the Roman siege camps that were below as they were building this siege to basically slaughter the rest of the people who were

left. Instead of letting the Romans get them as the siege was being built, they actually committed suicide, and they all killed themselves instead of bearing up under the Roman swords. It was a horrible, horrible time in the history of the people of God.

And what Jesus is really getting across, and this is not very edifying, I realize, for Sunday morning, but what Jesus is getting across is that our faith should not be in the institutions of this world.

That's one of the biggest problems that we all have, is that we put our faith in things that are not God.

And so, as he is telling this to his disciples and his followers, this institution that everybody has put their trust in is going to be leveled to the ground. They ask the next question, "Well, when is this going to happen, and how will we know that this is about to happen?" And he says that, "Beware at this moment that you're not led astray, for many will come in my name and say, I am he, and the time is near. Do not go after them."

We all in ourselves have an innate desire for certainty and for structure and patterns and predictability. And when the apple cart is upset, so to speak, we start to grasp for certainty from other things. And one of the first places that we can go, and this is a danger actually Jesus is warning us about, is to try to find a guru or a wise person that we can put our faith and trust in some kind of leader. And you see this happening even in our society where people are, they gravitate towards charismatic leaders, whether they're politicians or commentators on political podcasts or even charismatic clergy and pastors. And Jesus warns us, "Don't put your faith in people either."

It's not a charismatic leader that is going to provide that certainty and protection for yourself."

I know our trust has to be in the Lord and Him alone. I love the canticle that the praise band just sang for us, "Surely it is God who saves me. I will trust in Him and not be afraid."

For the Lord is my stronghold, not a temple or a building or an institutional system or structure. The Lord is my institution.

He is my structure, my fortress. The Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense. And He will be my Savior. He's, my guru. He's, my leader. He's my one that I need to follow."

And so, the challenge of the Scriptures today is to be prepared for monumental upheaval. It can sometimes come.

We live in a day where we don't see too much monumental upheaval. We have a pretty predictable and structured environment. But what the Lord was telling the people of that day is that you can hear of the wars and the insurrections. Don't be afraid because the world will constantly have these types of upheavals.

And there are opportunities actually for us to bear witness and to point to the one who we have our ultimate trust and faith in. He says, "Before all this occurs, there will arrest you and persecute you, and they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name." This is what's called persecution for your faith. And he says this is actually an opportunity to bear witness and to testify. So, make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance.

This past hundred years has actually been one of the bloodiest for Christian persecution around the world. We haven't experienced too much of it around here in very nice Ortega. You don't see a lot of Christian persecution happening in Ortega or Jacksonville. But in the last century, more people have been persecuted and even killed for their faith in Jesus Christ than all of the other twenty centuries prior to that. It's quite a statistic.

And I'll give you one example that's currently happening in Nigeria. This is where most of the Christian persecution is happening. You've probably seen some of that rising to the surface in the news. Sometimes it doesn't ever make the news. One of the worst Christian persecutions that took place happened in 1950 with the Ottoman Turks when they went in and invaded the nation of Armenia, which was 90 percent Christians, 90 percent Christians.

And the Ottoman Turks were pretty ruthless to those who they invaded, but it was very much a Christian persecution against Islam. And they went and they would ask the citizens of the country to renounce their faith. And almost to a person, they refused to give up the name of Jesus or to submit to compromise their faith.

And over a million people, a million Armenians, were marched into the Saharan desert and slaughtered.

It was one of the worst Christian persecutions that has ever been happened, and it happened in the last hundred years.

We again, we live in a place of a lot of peace and prosperity, and we don't see that kind of thing around here. And it's easy for us to get complacent and even lackadaisical in our witness. The word "witness" in the Greek is actually the Greek word "martyr," and it meant that you testified to the name of Jesus Christ with your life.

And while we may not have people attacking us on anything other than maybe Facebook or something like that, which could be probably the worst form of Christian persecution that we experience in our day, nevertheless, we can still be martyrs for the Christian faith.

And yes, the institutional upheavals, government shutdowns, and these kinds of things are happening in our day.

We don't put our faith in institutions. We don't trust in the gurus. We trust in the Lord.

But these become occasions for us to bear witness for Christ.

Maybe we don't have a threat against our life, but we do have threat against our ideals and our beliefs.

And so, it's incumbent upon us as Christians to bear up and to bear witness to the name of Jesus and to share the faith that is within us, that we don't trust in these things, but we trust in the Lord.

One of the more pertinent upheavals that any of you or I will face is actually to have stripping of our idols in our life. And we may not see national upheaval, but sometimes we can experience tremendous personal upheaval. It can happen when our health is stripped away from us, and maybe our bodies don't do the things that we expect them to do, and they start to fall apart, or it could be that we're struggling in our marriages, or our work and our employment is in turmoil. And these individual strippings actually teach us the exact same lessons that Jesus is trying to get across about the institutions of this world, is that our faith is not in our job, or even in our physical stamina and health, but our faith has to be in the Lord. And as these things are stripped away from us, and we experience these personal and even individual turmoils, our voice should say, "Surely it is God who saves me. I will trust in Him and not be afraid, for the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, and He will be my Savior."

I was talking to somebody this week actually who has been through some health crises that actually made them think about their own life and even thinking about that.

And they said, and this was a very profound statement, they said, "When you are facing the loss of things like maybe even your health or even your life, there's something about that that makes you realize that I only have the Lord to rely on in this moment."

And that's a very, very profound learning and statement. And I wish that people didn't have to go through the loss of difficult things and experience the upheavals and turmoils. I would never want to see in our day the kinds of political upheavals in the United States that Jesus was describing for Jerusalem and Israel.

But sometimes it's what it takes in order for us to really, truly give our lives to the Lord and to be a witness for Him.