SO WHAT: Jesus teaches his disciples, including us, that the future will bring suffering, trials, false teachers and many uncertain events. But in the midst of his teaching Jesus also challenges and teaches us to remain faithful and continue to be faithful witnesses even in the midst of uncertain times.

Do you ever experience those times in life when things just don’t seem normal? You know, those times when nothing is really wrong but nothing is quite right…nothing is as it usually is…everything just seems a little out of place. It may be big things or small things…it could be a moment or it could be days or weeks at a time. Last week Jacob and the Lee Christian high school basketball team had their first basketball game. It was actually a jamboree type of tournament where they didn’t really play full length games and it didn’t count in their overall record, but it was a game like setting as they played against an opposing team and had a full slate of referees on the court. Now, if you watch basketball you may understand that at the beginning of the second half the teams switch sides of the courts on which they play, however someone decided that day that the teams would play the second half of the game on the same side of the court that they played the first half. Some of the referees, one of the coaches and all of the players seemed to understand this change in the normal rules…but the other
referees and the other coach kept saying that they needed to switch…and so the teams would start switching sides of the court at which point some of the referees would tell them they needed to stop and go back to where they were at which point the other coach and referees would tell them know to go back the other way—it was an absolute mess for nearly 5 minutes, or so it seemed.

Our Scripture passage today is Jesus having a teaching moment with his disciples. While this type of scene is really not uncommon for us, his subject matter is often a little uncomfortable for Christians in today’s world. Notice that this teaching moment takes place in the Temple. Ever since Jesus made his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the Temple has been the dominant setting for him…he has cleansed the Temple; he encountered hostile questions while in the Temple; Jesus has denounced the scribes in the Temple; and he points out the generosity of the poor widow compared to the wealthy in the Temple. It really isn’t surprising to find Jesus in the Temple because that is where we would expect to find him…after all, he is the son of God. But today’s teaching moment takes place towards the end of Jesus’ life and ministry…and after all he has taught and demonstrated people still miss the point that he was trying to get across. While we are not sure if it was a disciple or not, we can with some sense of reason assume that it was someone who followed Jesus who makes the comment at the
beginning of our passage, concerning the Temple and how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God. And it was this innocent comment that opened the door for a lesson from Jesus that was important for his disciples…and that is important for us as well.

Now what often catches people’s attention in this passage is the first section, roughly verses 5 through 11. At the outset Jesus begins describing the end times…the time that we believe will occurred just before he returns. This section captures people’s attention because there is an interest in trying to know when the end times will occur, when will Jesus return, how much longer do we have here on earth? And while Jesus does describe that time, it really isn’t the focal point of his teaching. You see there is a literary technique called “end-stress” that says to state last that which is of primary importance. And so Jesus begins by describing the end times in order to emphasize and highlight his main focus which is found in versus 12 through 19.

You see, before the end of the world, or the return of Jesus will occur there will be a time of great uncertainty. Jesus says to his believers that they will be arrested and persecuted—meaning that because of their faith in Him they will face these things. What is described is the fact that Christians are going to live in great difficulty. It is
going to be a time when governments and leaders are going to persecute them and where people that they have trusted are going to turn and betray them. We often want to think that our faith is going to protect us from facing difficult times— that if we have enough faith we will not get sick, we will not face obstacles, we will not face persecution or ridicule, and that stress will somehow avoid us…but Jesus shatters that illusion. Our faith will not make us immune to such crisis and hardships. Now I know that is not necessarily what we want to hear. I mean, all churches are looking for ways to bring in new members and while I may not be an expert in evangelism—I suspect that telling people, “Accepting Jesus Christ is going to put you right and the middle of the firestorm” may not be the best sounding invitation. Friends, I don’t want to blow things out of proportion or sound “the sky is falling” alarm, but we are living in the midst of these uncertain times that Jesus describes. Christians around the world are facing persecution because of their faith...beatings, imprisonment, kidnapping, and even death. And here in this country there are stories of Christians losing their jobs because of their faith, restrictions being put on our free speech, and images of what we believe being removed from sight. There are more movies, articles, books and songs that ridicule our faith or even outright denounce it. These are the times, the uncertain times, that Jesus talks about.
So the question that we face is this, “What are we, as Christians, supposed to do?” Are we supposed to lay low and keep quiet? Are we to huddle amongst ourselves and refrain from going into the world with what we believe? Are we to play it safe in order to preserve our safety? While these questions may sound a little odd, the answer may sound even more so...because the answer that we get from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is an emphatic NO! You see, Jesus says that these times of uncertainty are going to give us an opportunity to testify — to share our faith, to tell the good news of Jesus Christ and to spread the word of God. Now he is clear that doing so may bring us in opposition with the authorities but he also said those times of opposition would also open doors to opportunities. So does this mean that Jesus wants each one of us to run home and write out a little sermon that we should memorize and be able to tell to others in a moment’s notice? Well, not really. Instead what Jesus encourages us to do is to nurture our own faith in Him, to strengthen our own relationship with him, to study the Scriptures and to be comfortable with who we are in Christ. He gives us these instructions because when we are strong in our own faith and the opportunity presents itself to share our faith then the Holy Spirit will be with us and guide us in what to say. These times that we are living in makes it imperative that each and every one of us takes the time to nurture and deepen our own faith...through Bible study, devotional readings, intensive
times of prayer, Sunday School, worship and anything else that helps bring us into the presence of God so that we are prepared to testify to the truth.

    Amen.