

End Times
Luke 21:5-19

Just about the time of year when we are starting to get ramped up for the holiday festivities, the lectionary is slow to get in the holiday spirit and offers us several texts predicting the terrible calamities that await us when the end of the world is just around the corner. Wars and rumors of wars, earthquake and famine, disease and pestilence.

What is surprising, though, is as terrifying as the description was, what Jesus was talking about in today's gospel reading wasn't the end of time, it was the end of their immediate world. The seeds of unrest and revolt were growing in Israel, and in the year 70 AD, not 40 years after Jesus died, the Romans marched in and destroyed Jerusalem and their beautiful Temple. The one thing they thought would always be there for them.

I've never liked preaching the apocalyptic texts, but honestly, this one's not much better. It's like there is a Goldilocks version of scripture readings:

Some are too relevant – go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor. We don't like that kind. It makes people not happy with us.

Some are just right, like don't murder, don't be envious, they're safe, they're relevant; easy to preach on.

And some just don't seem to be relevant enough, like this one. It seems to have lost its sting in today's world.

I'm not concerned that Canada is going to invade the US and destroy Johnson City or Chicago. The only real risk there is that the church will be destroyed today is from these pine trees, but they are far more likely to fall on our neighbor's houses than on us. I haven't lost a minute of sleep at night worried about being persecuted for being a disciple of Jesus in the heart of the Bible Belt.

So does this text only have historical value? Is it merely interesting, and not relevant? I don't think so. Even though it's not an END TIMES speech with capital letters, and even though we aren't facing the demise of the church and the possibility of the demise of our lives simply because we are Christians, everything he has said still holds true for all of the other sorts of ends we face. The end of...

polar caps,
the church, at least as we have known it,
your pride or reputation,
the good life,
your home, maybe to foreclosure or because your family doesn't think
you can stay there safely anymore,
independence,
a friendship,
peace and security as a nation, or maybe just the ability to let our kids
roam the neighborhood like we did when we were kids,
morality and civility,

health,
 life,
 innocence and childhood for our kids who were forced to grow up too fast,
 end of a Christian culture and the ‘freedom’ to be a Christian in the public arena.

Even if the thought of our beloved church being leveled by invaders doesn’t keep us up at night, almost everything else we hold dear and important will, at some point, come to an end.

I’ll be truthful. I don’t find Jesus’ words here to be very comforting. We are used to prophets who come along and warn us about the coming wrath of God. And even though a lot of the Old Testament frankly scares and confuses us, we kind of like all that contractual language that promises that, if we obey God, God will practically build us a nice big house on easy street.

But here comes Jesus telling us that, no, well, sorry to be misleading, all sorts of bad things *are* about to happen to you anyway, whether you’re good or not. For reasons that may or may not have to do with your excessive consumption and pollution, the icebergs just might melt and all the polar bears will die. You probably will have to give up driving one day. Social Security actually might run out of money before you retire. The moral and civil fabric of society could very well unravel and those young people who never say please or thank you, much less sir or ma’am. and have scary piercings that remind you of those photos in National Geographic of tribal people in Africa, they’re going to be the ones who end up taking care of you one day. The most saintly person you know might end up dying a long, slow, painful and completely undeserved death.

What we want Jesus to say is that God is benevolent and gracious, ought to be a bit more hopeful and positive, and wrap us in heavenly bubble wrap to protect us from getting beaten and battered on life’s journey, but he doesn’t. He says, yeah, things are going to get bad. Things won’t always be the same as they’ve always been, or as we want them; the things we love most might not always be there for us.

But the other thing he says, in absolute seriousness and without apology is, *Don’t be afraid*. Not because God’s going to come along on his white steed and rescue you at the last moment, because that may not happen. And not because it won’t be painful, because it very well could be. Remember how fervently Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane that he wouldn’t have to face arrest and crucifixion? As a lot of you in this room can attest to, God doesn’t spare us from pain and grief and sadness.

But what God does spare us from fear. As weird and unlikely as it sounds, you can grieve and be fearless at the same time. You can be in agony, and not be afraid. Because even if you are in pain, physical or emotional or even spiritual, you can’t be hurt. For the people of God those are two different things, pain and hurt. Lots of things in life can cause us pain – friends who turn out not to be such friends after all, illness, losing someone we love, or something we have always found comfort in. But there is only one thing in life that can actually hurt us, and that is if God turns his back on us; washes his hands of us, withdraws his love for us. And that’s not going to happen.

I still remember the day 15 years ago that Jim and I went to the pediatric cardiologist in Knoxville and were told that our son, Aaron, would die shortly after he was born. It was the most terrible news I had ever been given. I was devastated. We were devastated. And yet, I felt a deep peace too. Not because things were going to turn out all right in the long run for Aaron, but simply because God is.

If I hang my hopes and happiness and sense of well-being on my attachments – family, friends, a warm house, my health and independence and successes – surely I will be disappointed, if not crushed. All of those things will fail me or come to an end at some point. They cannot bear the weight of my hope, and my life will end in bitter misery if I expect them to or demand them to.

I think that was what Jesus was getting at when he told his disciples not to lay up their treasures on earth. He didn't just mean don't be materialistic. He meant don't expect too much of anything temporal – your car and house, your health, a significant other. Don't **need** them to be able to give your life meaning and purpose and joy.

Only one thing can do that for us. God. Only God can be our hope, our peace, our comfort, our joy. And if we have that, if we have God, no matter how rocky or painful life gets, we have no reason to be afraid.

I love the way the Scottish pastor and author, George MacDonald, put it: “let us comfort ourselves in the thought of the Father and the Son. So long as there dwells harmony, so long as the Son loves the Father...all is well with the little ones. God is all right – why should we mind standing in the dark for a minute outside his window? Let us think to ourselves, ‘God is; Jesus is not dead. Nothing can be going wrong, however it may look to hearts unfinished in childness.’”

How often have you thought to yourself or heard someone say, the world is a scary place? A lot lately, probably. And to that Jesus says, don't be afraid. God is. Jesus is not dead. Nothing can be going wrong, however it may look to hearts unfinished in childness.