

For those of us who keep up with this sort of thing, this is the next-to-last Sunday of the church year, and the last Sunday in Ordinary Time. Next week is Christ the King Sunday, and then begins the season of Advent—that time of waiting and preparing for Christ to come—a time when we are truly in the already-but-not yet of the kingdom of God. We say it is “already” because Christ was born all of those years ago, and we say it’s “not yet” because we believe that Christ will return at some point and institute a new heaven and new earth and God’s kingdom will be fully realized. But for now we wind down this last few days on the Christian calendar, and we follow Jesus as he makes his way into Jerusalem to settle in for the winter, so to speak.

For several weeks the scripture passages have shown Jesus teaching in the temple and being questioned by different groups and individuals and answering anything that is thrown at him. The Pharisees questioned him about taxes: is it lawful to pay them or not? His famous answer: give to Caesar what is Caesar, and to God what is God’s—leaving the Pharisees speechless. The rich young ruler wanted to know how to get into heaven; Jesus counseled him to sell all his goods and give the money to the poor, then come and follow Jesus—and the young man went away sad, “for he had many things.” The Sadducees tried to make him look foolish by asking him a riddle about the resurrection, and he countered by teaching that they were thinking wrongly about the resurrection, that our existence at that time would be entirely different than life on earth and it would be our relationship with God that would be of primary importance; this left the Sadducees looking foolish themselves. And after that, the scripture tells us, “no one dared ask him any more questions.”

Today we’re with Jesus in Jerusalem, passing by the temple with his disciples, when he overhears someone going on about the beautiful stones and gifts for God; and he says to his disciples, “there will come a day when the temple will be destroyed—not one stone will be left on top of another.”

Now to get the impact of this statement, we must understand what this temple was. Not only was it the place where all Israel went to worship, where God was said to live, but it was a hugely massive building—said to hold 400,000 in its outer courts. 400,000 people! I don’t know how familiar you are with modern football stadiums; but Neyland Stadium, home of the Tennessee Volunteers in Knoxville, holds over 100,000 people—and it’s a huge place. The average major league baseball stadium holds about 50,000 people I believe, maybe more than that, but that’s still a lot of people in one place. And Bristol Motor Speedway, of NASCAR fame, holds about 160,000 fans. So to imagine a venue that would hold 400,000 people is kind of mind blowing. And besides that, it was an ornate building—but

only because Herod, the Roman governor of the area who liked to be thought of as “King of the Jews, had refurbished an existing temple, pouring money into it in order to create a more impressive Jewish temple than the pagan temples of his rivals.

So for Jesus to predict the destruction of such a beautiful and enormous edifice must have been pretty shocking to the disciples, and of course they immediately wanted to know when it would happen. It’s human nature, I think, to have those thoughts; if ever anyone predicted the destruction of, say, the White House, I think most people would want to know when the one making the prediction believed it would happen.

But when they ask this question, they don’t get a straight answer (surprise, surprise, right?). I can imagine Jesus getting a faraway look in his eyes, gazing off into the distance as he says, “you will hear many say that the time is near, but don’t listen to them; and a lot of things will happen that will be scary—kingdoms and nations will come and go; there will be earthquakes and storms and famine and disease; and the skies will be filled with signs and wonders. (I like the way the Message version puts this last line—“you’ll think they very sky is falling.”)

And then Jesus goes on to say that, before this happens, his followers would be harassed and arrested, turned in by family and friends, hunted and chased down and even put to death—but that this will give them the opportunity to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. They are not to plan ahead what to say, but when the time comes Christ himself will give them words. And even in the face of persecution and death, they will be saved by enduring what they will go through.

Now there is more to this speech of Jesus’, which is often called the “little Apocalypse” because of its “end times” flavor; but this certainly isn’t what we today have come to expect about being Christians, is it? Maybe we’ve waited so long that we have forgotten what Christ taught about his return, or perhaps Christianity has become so mainstream that persecution is the last thing we expect (at least in America—there are places where it is still illegal to teach Christianity or worship as a Christian or have anything to do with Christianity.) Oh sometimes we complain, saying there’s a “war” on Christianity or Christmas, but in the grand scheme of things we really have nothing to complain about. Churches still receive tax relief, it isn’t illegal to go to a Christian church or carry a Bible in public or discuss Christian doctrine in public. If we have to give some room to other faiths in the public square—or keep ours out of the public square because others aren’t allowed either—that stings a little bit but isn’t close to the persecution suffered by millions over the years for practicing their Christian faith—or the persecution at times doled out by Christians upon non-Christians.

But I'm not sure that this idea of persecution is the main idea of the "little Apocalypse"; rather, I believe that Jesus here is wanting his disciples to know that God is still active in the world, that God is transforming and continues to transform the world but that sometimes this transformation may be painful and difficult. We see that in the passage from Isaiah, which describes what happens when God is active in this transformation. God will create a not just a new heaven but a new earth as well. No one will grieve over lives cut short by illness or accident; everyone will have a place to live and food to eat. Enemies will forget their differences and evil will be defeated forever.

We must remember that God created this world, this heavens and earth, to be *good*. But human sinfulness, brought about by the forces of evil, allowed sin and evil to take hold in the good and perfect world that God had created, making it not so perfect anymore. Oh there are bright spots: October blue skies; the ocean waves crashing against the shore; the stillness and liveliness of the woods; and many more glimpses of what the world was intended to be. But we also see the ruined parts of God's creation—cancer causing agents and other things that make us sick; greed that causes humanity to turn a blind eye to climate change in order to make more and more profit; violence that permeates our cities and violates the peaceful order that God intended for humanity. We see it in our individual lives—lives that leave little time to seek the presence of God and instead have us running in circles; mental illness in ourselves or our children or family members, that keeps the one suffering from living a life that God intends; drug addiction which is a scourge on our families and our communities, ruining lives and destroying families; poverty that has complex causes but is blamed on laziness and weak character, that keeps people from being able to live in a way that glorifies God because they are constantly working just to keep a roof over their heads, if they have one, and food on their table, if they have one. Many are the problems in our world today, many are the problems sitting in this room right now that maybe we share with each other and maybe we don't because we just don't want anyone to see that brokenness within us. And yet as Christians we believe that God is still at work, transforming this world back toward the good creation, the good kingdom it was created to be. The only thing is, this transformation won't be easy. But giving our witness, our testimony, will be key to bringing about the change that God intends.

This week a new president was elected, a president that many people didn't expect or want. I don't want to preach about whether or not he will be a good president or how I voted or you voted or anyone voted. Many people are happy about the new president, but many more are not only unhappy but also worried and fearful. The campaign was ugly and the rhetoric of the now president-elect was vitriolic at times. Beyond that the way people interact with each other, especially on social media,

shows a lack of civility at best and outright distrust and hostility at worst. Old wounds have been reopened and new wounds are being formed. There seems to be such a lack of trust among people which seems to be encouraged by those in power; we have bought into the idea that our government can save us but only if it follows a certain ideology.

And while government has a role to play in keeping society safe and cared for government was never God's intention for our salvation. God never intended there to be a need for a human being to mediate the relationship between God and the people. When we look at the scriptures we see that it's always the people who seek a go-between. Moses, Judges, and finally, the people demanded a king "to be like other nations." God didn't intend for human beings to rule over other human beings and even warned that it wouldn't be what people expected it to be. This is what we see when we look at the election through the lens of scripture--- government has a role to play but isn't our salvation.

When Luke has Jesus predict the fall of the temple and the persecution of his followers, he is writing to a specific audience who has already endured this time of suffering. They could read this and say, yeah it did happen but here we are on the other side! God was with us all along! It doesn't mean that there wasn't pain and suffering but that God was with the people all along. And from older scriptures they would know that when the people of God come through hard times God has good, new things waiting; and not just heavenly things but earthly things as well. "A new heaven AND a new earth" is promised.

And as people of God we have these promises as well. But we also have the example of Jesus Christ to help us know what to do while we await the promises. We are to love one another as Jesus loved the disciples. We need to love one another as Jesus loved the least of these—the poor, the oppressed, the strangers in our midst. We need to have compassion for those who are marginalized and disenfranchised and make sure that as the marginalized become more visible and the disenfranchised more included that we all understand that it doesn't take anything away from anyone else. That we are stronger together than we are when we allow ourselves to be separated. That there is no place for racism, misogyny, and other forms of hatred in our society. As Christians I hope we are better than "us vs them" and can begin to rebuild trust and hope for our country and the world. That we can offer a place of safety, a place of love, a place of inclusion for all. Where we don't necessarily agree on everything but we have a common goal or purpose of creating a compassionate and fair society as described in Isaiah, where there are no more tears—for anyone—where there is no more hunger or homelessness—for anyone-- where lions and lambs feel safe together and the forces of evil are defeated. Amen.