

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 11/13/2022



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, November 13th

Luke 21:5-19

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Temples are toppling

This week's Gospel lection is part of the final act of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem. These events occur after the triumphal entry (19:28-40), the cleansing of the temple (19:45-48), and controversies with Jewish leaders (20:1-45). Jesus is with His disciples in the temple complex. Some people present spoke of the splendor of the temple which prompted Jesus to foretell the destruction of the temple and of wars and persecution. Not included in the lectionary text are verses where Jesus foretells the destruction of Jerusalem and the coming of the Son of Man (21:20-28). Such apocalyptic texts are more difficult to understand and apply to our time. However, when properly interpreted, Jesus' warnings and promises give us the ultimate hope for the tumult in our world as some of the "temples" of our day are being overturned.

Luke 21:5-19 Commentary

⁵ And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, ⁶ "As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down."

Perhaps the people commenting on the splendor of the temple had followed Jesus from Galilee and the awe of the structure had not yet worn off. There are those who argue the size and beauty of Herod the Great's Temple Mount exceeded virtually all of the seven wonders of the ancient world. This structure was more than twice the size of the Acropolis in Athens. According to the historian Josephus, Herod adorned the temple with white marble stones up to sixty-seven feet long, eighteen feet wide, and twelve feet high. The offerings were decorative gifts. One example is the golden vine Herod gave that had grape clusters as tall as a person.^{1,2} Jesus repeats His warning of 19:41-44. It must have seemed almost impossible to those people present that this structure could be destroyed. This makes Jesus' prediction even more inconceivable. Not only would this structure be destroyed but not even one stone standing on another would be left.

⁷ And they asked him, "Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?" ⁸ And he said, "See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is at hand!' Do not go after them. ⁹ And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once."

¹ Leon Morris, *Luke: an introduction and commentary*, vol. 3 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 313.

² T. C. Butler, *Luke*, vol. 3, (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2000), 350.

Naturally the people surrounding Jesus ask when all this will happen and what the signs will be. Jesus provides two signs: (1) False Messiahs and (2) Wars and tumult. Jesus also provides three warnings: (1) Don't follow the false Messiahs, (2) Don't be afraid, and (3) The end will not be at once.

¹⁰ Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. ¹¹ There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. ¹² But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake.

Jesus continues to offer signs. Recognizing at the end of v.9 "*but the end will not be at once*" it is not clear whether Jesus is talking about what must happen before the destruction of the temple or has transitioned to the signs that will proceed His return at the end of the age. Verse 12 could refer to the persecution of the Apostles detailed later by Luke in Acts and/or the type of persecution His followers can expect before the Second Coming.

¹³ This will be your opportunity to bear witness. ¹⁴ Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, ¹⁵ for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. ¹⁶ You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. ¹⁷ You will be hated by all for my name's sake. ¹⁸ But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹ By your endurance you will gain your lives.

No matter what age Jesus is talking about, persecution is an opportunity for His followers to bear witness. Jesus promises a "*mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand and contradict.*" In Acts we see how the Holy Spirit empowered the apostles with such mouth and wisdom. The nature of the intensity of persecution is seen by how followers will be given up by family members and some will experience martyrdom. Despite such persecution, in any age, "*not a hair of your head will perish*" - a metaphor for how despite such earthly difficulty, God's people will experience no spiritual harm. By endurance during the temporal challenges, we have the true hope in the final victory.

Reflections

Like any Scripture reading, this Gospel lection challenges us in two ways. First, what does it mean? Second, how do we apply it to our lives today? The answer to the first question depends, at least to some extent, when we believe Luke was written. Conservative scholars date Luke to the early 60s A.D. based on Luke comes before Acts and nothing in Acts is dated later than 62 A.D. Liberal scholars date Luke to no earlier than 80-90 A.D. and some even much later. In the former case, the Gospel lectionary is a prophecy since we know the temple was not destroyed until A.D. 70. In the latter case, the destruction of the temple would have already occurred by the time Luke's Gospel was written. If we hold to a later date Luke is describing an historical event from the perspective of salvation history rather than political history. Jesus' description of "*no stone left upon another*" would have thus been a firsthand observation by the author or a primary source. One interpretation is an account written about Jesus predicting world history, the other is open to the criticism of being an account of the author explaining world history.

For many, the rapid decline of the institutional church was as impossible to imagine for a 1960s audience as the total destruction of the temple was to the observer in the text. Recent church attendance data in the United States predicts that if nothing is done differently, churches today that have less than 100 attendees will be gone by 2040 (Dr. Bill Drummond, Professor of Urban Analytics, Georgia Tech). To put it another way, nearly 70 percent of all the congregations in the United States will be gone in less than 20 years. This analysis predates the Pandemic and thus we can only imagine 2040 will be here sooner than initially thought. The underlined text here

is critical: if nothing is done differently. Yet as a people who understand the idea of regeneration and resurrection, how God promises a re-created world, how is that we continue to expect the future will continue to resemble today?

When this text last appeared in the lectionary three years ago, COVID-19 was practically unheard of. Three years later and we are still reeling from the pervasive changes to our world that this disease and our response to it have caused. The idea of new normal is now normal, even though this new normal has still not yet been fully revealed and we continue to exist in a neutral zone between the old and the new. At the same time, however, many people continue to assume the new normal will be a slight tweak of the old normal.

This text helps to remind us of the reality of the world we live in and the promise of a redeemed and recreated world that will come. We are no strangers to the idea of re-birth and regeneration in the present. We are, after all, the resurrection people. Are we not called to see the possibility of what the world could be as we are tasked with being workers for the Kingdom in this life? What if we were to reimagine how church could be? What if we were to be led more by Scripture than the tradition of previous generations as to how church could be expressed in our time and place? How might the expression of the local church be different? How might our communities be different? How might our world be different?

At times like these it is comforting to remember that while Jesus promised persecution, He also promised the power of the Holy Spirit. There will be tumult, yet we are promised the ultimate hope if we persevere. As the world groans around us we still have the job of being Christ's ambassadors on this earth. While stones may be toppling, we are still the Kingdom builders. Are we building His Kingdom, or trying to hold onto ours?

