

Sermon: Beginning of the End

Scripture: Luke 21:5-19

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he 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.” They ask him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” And he said, “Beware that you are not lead astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them. “When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.” Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. “But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to understand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.” This is the word of God

Every generation, at some time in it’s history, has thought it’s time was the end of time – and the dawn of the twenty-first century has been no exception. The current generation can reflect upon experiences of war, natural disaster, and political chaos as fodder for an apocalyptic possibility.

Most people remember where they were and what they were doing on September 11, 2001, when nineteen terrorists associated with Al-Qaeda hijacked four commercial airline jets. The sight of hundreds of military tanks streaming across the desert toward Baghdad as part of the “shock and awe” campaign is emblazoned on the American imagination. On December 26, 2004, the world was startled by a tsunami in Indonesia, one of the deadliest natural disasters in history. Many people have a vivid memories of news footage from New Orleans during and after Hurricane Katrina. While it is not clear that these and other phenomena are in any way apocalyptic, only God knows the end time,

Jesus’ directions to the disciples concerning what they ought to do in times of chaos and destruction were quite challenging then and are equally challenging for us today. In Luke 21:5-6 Jesus speaks of the destruction of the temple, prompting the disciples to ask two questions: When? What will be the sign? Jesus goes on to describe three things that will happen in the future (v.8-11): imposters will come and try to trick the faithful; war and conflict will rage on; and natural disasters will be prevalent. Jesus assures the disciples that the end times are in the future and that they will not happen all at once. Then Jesus says a rather peculiar thing in verse 13; “This will give you an opportunity to testify”.

He goes on to tell the disciples that their testimony must not be rehearsed or “canned”. Instead, they should rely on the uncontestable wisdom that will be given them in the moment. Jesus says that the reward for their testimony and their endurance of these catastrophic times will be the gaining of their very souls. Let us reflect on Jesus’ peculiar statement about suffering as an opportunity for testimony.

What kind of testimony does a faithful person give in the face of death, betrayal, and the execution of loved ones? Most of us are accustomed to testimonies that praise God for good times, good things, blessings of redemption, healing, rescue, and salvation. Testimony is usually reserved for the stories that declare how God brought the faithful out of slavery and into freedom, how God made a way when there was no way; how God

acted to save a distressed people. The peculiar words of Jesus in this passage, however, tell us that when we experience destruction, betrayal, and loss, we are to see these times as opportunities to testify.

The disciples begin this passage distracted. They marvel at the beauty of the temple, the enormous stones of its walls, and the wealthy worshipers coming to dedicate their gifts. Small wonder that they are distracted. The public exhibition of fabulous wealth has a way of distracting us, whether we see it in “Town and Country” or “People” magazine, and the temple was Herod’s temple, the crown jewel in his architectural crown.

The enormous stones, beautiful, smooth, and apparently “indestructible”; “Not one stone will be left upon another”; the glorious temple dedicated to a glorious God, “All will be thrown down” (v.8).

Writing sometime after the destruction of the temple, Luke characterizes Jesus as a reliable prophet whose words were proven true by historical events. Those who listen to him discover that all of Jesus’ words are true, and therefore listeners can trust these words that threaten such dismaying dislocations.

Theologically Luke means to distinguish the end time of all things from particular historical events. The temple may have come to an end, but that is not “The End”; peace will come to an end and be swallowed up by war, but war is not the way the world ends; security will end, shaken in earthquakes, but fear and uncertainty are not the end either. People will try to mimic Jesus and misuse his name attempting to prophesy as he did, but the world does not end with truth’s impersonators. “Dreadful portents and great signs from heaven” (v.11) may tempt you to play prophet yourself, reading the concealed meanings of mysterious happenings, but knowing the end does not belong to you.

Wars, insurrections, earthquakes, famine, plagues, and, just when it seems like it cannot possibly get any worse, it gets personal: You will be arrested, You will be persecuted, You will be thrown into prison and hauled before the authorities. Then, Jesus says, then you will have them right where you want them. They will have to listen to you. Just when everything looks so dark, when falsehood appears so persuasive, when war seems everlasting and inevitable, when the earth trembles beneath you, when you are forced to account for yourself, you have “an opportunity to testify” (v.13).

This rambling, discombobulated directory of events – wars, earthquakes, famine – these are not random happenings, nor are they reliable signs of the end, but they are things that must happen first in the grand design of God’s redemption. (v.9). We had not noticed the plan. The sheer immensity of wars, earthquakes, famines, and plagues so completely arrest our attention that we seldom look for something even more overwhelming. In Jesus’ vision, however, these dramatic historical events are simply a required stage setting for the great drama of speaking God’s truth.

Given the towering backdrop of wars, earthquakes, and famine, we might assume we do not have much to say. Moreover, arrest, persecution, and arraignment notoriously intimidate and silence people. Everything, however, is working according to plan, God’s plan: “This will give you an opportunity to testify” (v.13). If we must speak, we should like some time to prepare, to consult perhaps a volume of the Bible and to arrange our thoughts, but Jesus dismisses our anxiety as unnecessary. Our powerlessness to speak may be our most essential qualification. Jesus promises them, “I will give you the words”. The words we have to say we receive as a gift. Christ possesses a wisdom our troubled world and his troubling opponents cannot calculate or comprehend. Although they have rejected his words before, once again Christ will speak the word of the kingdom through his church.

Christ promises to speak the word. The word we are given is the word that created all things in the beginning (Gen 1:3) and continues to create in its speaking.

We do not speak with confidence but rather out of our speaking and hearing ourselves bear testimony we receive the gift of faith: “Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17). Such is the power of Jesus’ words that they not only describe a kingdom but fashion a habitable place. The disclosures of Luke 21:5-19 take their own opportunity to testify to this.

LET ME TELL YOU A STORY:

An opportunity for testimony born out of a time of loss, grief, and chaos is recorded in the song “Precious Lord,” written by Thomas Dorsey. Thomas Dorsey, born in 1889 in rural Georgia, was a prolific songwriter and an excellent gospel and blues musician. While a young man, Dorsey moved to Chicago and found work as a piano player in the churches as well as in clubs and playing in theatres. Struggling to support his family, Dorsey divided his time between playing in the clubs and playing in the church. After some time of turbulence, Dorsey devoted his artistry exclusively to the church.

In August of 1932, Dorsey left his pregnant wife in Chicago and traveled to be the featured soloist at a large revival meeting in St. Louis. After the first night of the revival, Dorsey received a telegram that simply said, “Your wife just died”. Dorsey raced home and learned that his wife had given birth to a son before dying in childbirth. The next day his son died as well. Dorsey buried his wife and son in the same casket and withdrew in sorrow and agony from his family and friends. He refused to compose or play music for quite some time. While still in despair, Dorsey said that as he sat in front of a piano, a feeling of peace washed through him. He heard a melody in his head that he had never heard before and began to play it on the piano. That night, Dorsey recorded this testimony while in the midst of suffering:

Precious Lord, take my hand, Lead me on, let me stand; I am tired, I am weak, I am worn; Through the storm, through the night, Lead me on to the light; Take my hand, precious Lord, Lead me home.

Prayer:

Be patient, beloved, until the coming of the Lord.

Take heart, for the day of the Lord is near. AMEN

BENEDICTION:

Just as the destruction of the temple testified to the truthfulness of Jesus’ words when the gospel of Luke was written, so do these words spoken in the worship of Christian communities’ bear witness to Christ’s unshakeable promise. They are only words, small breathes of air spoken millennia ago, but these words endure with the power, even power to “gain your souls” (v19). The temple is destroyed, not one stone left on another. But, These words endure, and their promise is not diminished by earthquake, war, or famine – or even the passing of years.