

23 Sunday after Pentecost (L33C), November 13, 2019
Luke 21:5-19

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We've just come through a mid-term election this past week, or maybe, to be fair, we've voted, but we're not quite *through* the election because the votes are still being counted in a few races. If you're still watching broadcast or cable TV, you've no doubt been exposed to the political ads there. We became "cord-cutters" a few years ago when fiber-optic internet was made available in our neighborhood, and so we don't see many of those ads anymore. But I do pay attention to the reporting about them, and about the campaigning of both our major parties, so I know that the picture that is painted in the run-up to elections in recent years has been downright apocalyptic. "If we lose this election, it will be the end of the world."

Today we are turning the corner into the final weeks of the church year, and in today's readings things have also gotten downright apocalyptic. We've got nations rising against nations, people against people, earthquakes, famine, and plagues – or at least the promise of those things in the future. Bad times are coming, Jesus tells his disciples. And of course they want details. Who wouldn't? They want to know when the disaster will come that will reduce the beautiful Jerusalem temple to rubble. Of course they do. And ever since then – and probably before as well, because Jesus isn't the first to warn about such things – people have believed themselves to be living in the end times. And there have always been people ready to take advantage of other people's fear of the end of the world, and to help them get ready. The Jehovah's Witnesses were famous for this in their early days. They've had to become less specific about this though, after their predictions turned out to be wrong. And do you remember all the hysteria ten years ago with the Mayan calendar? The world was supposed to end in 2012 because that's when the Mayan calendar ran out. I'm not sure why the Mayans were supposed to be determinative of everything. Calendars run out all the time. It's why we had to buy a new one every year before everything went onto our computers and phones. And I'm sure some of you are still using paper calendars and that you don't freak out every December when you see that there are no more days after December 31.

Anyway, I understand the urge to believe that you're living at the end of the world. A part of this is an awareness of own mortality, which we easily universalize. "If I'm going to die, maybe the whole world is dying too." And then there are others who believe that a general calamity is coming, but also believe that some will survive. There's a whole subculture in this country dedicated to stocking up on food, weapons, and ammunition in remote locations in preparation for the collapse of society.

What's interesting to me in today's Gospel reading is that while Jesus himself speaks with confidence about a coming apocalypse, what he wants his followers to do with that information is surprising. I want to quickly break down what Jesus says here, and what this might mean for us in our own unsettled times.

First, Jesus wants those who follow him to *expect* that hard times are ahead for them, that they will suffer precisely because they follow him. Jesus' embodiment and proclamation of God's love and forgiveness for all people was a threat to the powers of the day, both the religious and the political powers. It undermined the temple economy, challenged the piety of the religious elites, and called into question the legitimacy of emperors, kings, and their deputies. It's hard for us to appreciate this, but Jesus' continual teaching about the coming kingdom of God was felt and understood as a direct challenge to both "church and state," if you will, to both the religious and political establishments. And you don't challenge those establishments without blowback. If in our own time we don't recognize the gospel as that kind of threat, then we might rightly wonder if we have watered down the Christian message, or turned it into something else.

Second, in the face of the difficulties that are bound to come when we follow Jesus, Jesus tells his disciples to “not be terrified.” We’re finishing our readings from the Gospel according to Luke next week and preparing to restart our three-year cycle with Matthew in two weeks. “Do not be afraid” is an ongoing theme in Luke. The first words spoken in Luke’s first chapter are, “do not be afraid.” The angel Gabriel says that, first to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, then to Mary when the angel comes to announce her part in God’s saving plan. “Do not be afraid,” says the angel to the shepherds in the fields, then Jesus says it to Peter after a miraculous catch of fish, and so on. Finally after his resurrection, when he at last appears to the disciples, he says, “Why are you frightened?” Fear is paralyzing. It interrupts your life and stops you doing what you need to do. Jesus wants us to expect hard times and not to be paralyzed by fear when they come.

Third, “These things *must* take place,” says Jesus. “Must they?” That’s how you want to respond to Jesus, isn’t it? “*Why* must these things take place?” I think there’s a translation problem here. We’re given the impression that God *needs* these things to happen, or that God has already *planned* for them to happen. I think the meaning here might be better translated, “These things are *bound* to take place.” It’s not that God wants them to happen, or has planned them. It’s just that because of who we are, nations *will* rise against nation. Case in point? Russia invading Ukraine. But this is also about all of our other power struggles: ethnic group against ethnic group, demographic against demographic, political party against political party. We’re just bound to have conflicts with each other because of who we are as sinful human beings. But what about plagues and famines? A global pandemic has dominated our lives over the past few years. That hasn’t been our fault, has it? Maybe not entirely. But we did use the occasion to fight about how to respond to it, didn’t we? Again, I don’t think God needs for these things to happen. But because of who we are and how we operate, they are just *bound* to happen. And as for signs and portents – well, we had a lunar eclipse on the morning of the election this past week. (Did you get up to see it? It was pretty cool.) Those are bound to happen to, because, as they say “science” – and that really goes for most earthquakes and plagues too.

Finally, endure. Don’t be afraid. Don’t panic. Don’t be paralyzed. When times are tough, hang in there. Be faithful to your calling. Be faithful to who Jesus has declared you to be in Holy Baptism, a freed and forgiven child of God and a citizen of the coming Kingdom of God. To the early church, who were mostly people without power or influence, this probably meant hunker down and be patient and faithful in any small way you can. To the present-day church, which in our context also includes people of power and influence, it means be persistent and faithful in your area of responsibility and expertise. Be a deep-state agent for the Kingdom of God by living with integrity, willing to prioritize the health of the creation and the good of humankind ahead of the personal and short-term gains that the world is constantly urging on us. This faithfulness in and of itself will speak volumes about who we are and whose we are.

Because behind this counsel for hard times lies Jesus’ promise that by his death and resurrection the forces of sin, death, and evil are defeated. We are freed from their power and reconciled with God and one another to live the life God created us for, loving God and our neighbor and caring for God’s good creation that God also is in the process of redeeming and renewing. All of this means that the end of the world, when it comes, will be an end that is in God’s control.

So hang in there, sisters and brothers in Christ. God is giving us what we need to endure, faith to trust in God’s help, hope for God’s good future, and a heart to love the world that God is not giving up on. Rejoice in that good news, and the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.