

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

We are in the final weeks of the church year, and in today's readings things have gotten downright apocalyptic. We've got nations rising against nations, people against people, earthquakes, famine, and plagues. 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 happen that will bring this glorious temple with its impossibly large stones to ruin. Of course they want to know. And ever since then – and probably before as well – people have believed themselves to be living in the end times. As I said last week, we probably aren't living in the last days of the world, but it can feel like that in the constant barrage of bad news that we face in so many areas of our collective lives, whether economic, political, or social. But there are also our individual and family crises that don't make the headlines. And even if the end of the *world* isn't coming soon, we are, all of us, facing finality, our own mortality. One way or another, an end is coming. And in the meantime, before the end comes, we may have to endure hardship of one kind or another.

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 maybe not what we expect. I want to quickly break down what Jesus says to his disciples here, and what it 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 are likely to 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 in our context, because we've gotten used to the idea of church and state coexisting, each with its proper area of influence, and maybe even working together for the common good. And there are some of our fellow Christians who want to go even further and merge the two, thinking that it would be a good idea for the church to rule the state. But Jesus' consistent teaching about the coming kingdom of God was felt and understood as a direct challenge to both church and state, 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 whether we have watered down the Christian message, or turned it into something else altogether.

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 are 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 a little while later to Mary when he comes to invite her into 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. Finally after his resurrection, when he at last appears to the disciples, Jesus asks them, "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 so that we are not paralyzed by fear when they do 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've told you before that 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. Russia has been making the case for that one for nearly four years now with its ongoing invasion of 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 are just bound to have conflicts with each other because of who we are as sinful human beings. But what about plagues and famines? Well, we did have that global COVID pandemic a few years back. And our response to that was a study in contrast. On the one hand we developed effective vaccines in record time, but because of our political and social disfunction we had trouble getting people to take the vaccines, or implement other measures like masking. 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 in the heavens – well, how about those auroras? (Did you go out and see them? We got a little taste on Tuesday, but not like others nearby, or even down in Carbondale.) Both pandemics and auroras are bound to happen, because that’s how the world works. Because, as they say, “science.”

It is what we do in the face of all these things that are bound to happen that Jesus wants to help us with. And he’s got one word for that, endure. Don’t panic. Don’t be afraid. Don’t be paralyzed. When times are tough, hang in there. But the word that is translated “endure” there can also mean “persist.” And therein, I believe, lies Jesus’ message: Be faithful to your calling. Keep on doing what you are already doing because of who Jesus has declared you to be in Holy Baptism, a freed and forgiven child of God and a citizen of God coming Kingdom. To the early church, who were mostly people without power or influence, that probably meant hunker down and be patient and faithful in any small way you could. 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 mercy for the suffering, the health of the creation, and the common good of all people ahead of the personal, national, and short-term interests that the world is constantly urging on us. Such faithfulness will in and of itself speak volumes about who we are and whose we are. And that is the key to Jesus’ strange exhortation here to “not prepare a defense” when we have an occasion to make a witness. Jesus doesn’t want us to waste our time cooking up brilliant arguments for how we are right and others are wrong. He wants to live lives shaped by trust in his promises and values. Because *that* is the preparation for bearing witness. We don’t need to prepare a defense for our faith when our lives are already testifying. And if we are ever called upon to speak about that, we will have plenty to talk about. Because most of us don’t have trouble talking about what we know and love. It’s getting us to shut up that is the challenge. (Speaking from personal experience, here.)

And so we endure and persist. It’s what our weekly gatherings here around God’s word and sacraments are all about. They keep us focused on the promise that by Jesus’ death and resurrection, the forces of sin, death, and evil are now conquered and in retreat. Even if it might not seem so right at this moment, we proclaim that Christ has freed us from their power and reconciled with God and one another so that we might 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 right now 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.