

The End of the World as We Know It!

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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, 6 “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.”

7 They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?”

8 And he said, “Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them.

9 “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.”

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 plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

12 “But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name.

13 This will give you an opportunity to testify. 14 So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; 15 for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.

16 You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death.

17 You will be hated by all because of my name.

18 But not a hair of your head will perish.

19 By your endurance you will gain your souls.

THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT

“That’s great.

It starts with an earthquake.

It’s the end of the world as we know it.”

Those are the words to a song by an alternative rock and roll group.
(R.E.M.)

(I’m sure most of you knew that
... being the alternative rock fans that you are!)

Those words seem especially appropriate this week.

Folks have been throwing around a lot of apocalyptic language lately.

If that other person wins, then that’s it
... it’s the end of the world as we know it.

So, this week’s lesson from Luke seems apt.
End of the world rhetoric dominates this passage.

Let’s see what it might teach us about the world in which we live.

BIG BUILDINGS AND STRONG RULERS

The passage begins with people admiring Herod’s Temple.

They said, “Look at those beautiful stones!
Look at all those beautiful gifts dedicated to God!
It’s amazing!”

The Temple really was amazing.

It was quite understandable that the people marveled at the beauty and the size of the Temple.

But, they did not see what was really important.
They missed God because they concentrated on the building instead of the person.

God was in Christ.
The Messiah, the Son of God was with them.
But, they did not recognize him.

Their minds were diverted by the glory of a big building and the power of a strong ruler.
They thought that they could find God in the building.

But, sadly, God was about to leave the building.

This can happen to us too.
We can be blinded by the glory of riches and big buildings and political power.

But, Jesus has some hard words for those who pin their hopes on the Temple.
He said, "The days are coming when this beautiful Temple will be torn down.
All these amazing stones will be scattered."

FEAR AND ANGER

That prediction was very frightening to the people.
This was the worst that could happen.

The Temple symbolized the presence of God.
The Temple complex took generations to build.

The people thought that if the Temple was destroyed, their nation would be destroyed.
There would be no hope.

The people still remembered the destruction of the first Temple at the hands of the Babylonians.

They couldn't bear to think of that happening again.

And so the message of Jesus not only made the people fearful ... it also made them very angry.

When Jesus cleansed the Temple of the money changers and those selling offerings and when he made this prediction about the destruction of the Temple, it set the stage for his crucifixion.

Sometimes people kill the messenger.

Of course they misunderstood the message.

Jesus was trying to change their thinking in a radical way. Jesus was preaching a hope that did not depend upon big buildings and political parties.

But, in order for Jesus to preach this true hope, false hope had to die.

Jesus had to say some harsh things in order to prepare his people for a new and different kingdom.

There even had to be a crucifixion in order for there to be a resurrection.

BIRTH PANGS OF THE NEW KINGDOM

Jesus brings that same difficult message to us as well.

It is the end of the world as we know it.

Why?

Because there's a new kingdom coming.

And the old kingdom is going to put up a fight.

In our passage for today we learn that Jesus never promised his disciples a rose garden.

Quite the contrary.

They would face great opposition.

The political hacks, the Sadducees would not go quietly. They would arrest the disciples of Jesus.

These politicians would bring them before kings and governors because they were preaching the gospel.

They would put these disciples in prison.

They would threaten their lives.

Much of what the disciples believed to be permanent was not permanent. And the source of true power would not always be where they sought it.

Even Herod's Temple with its massive stones can be destroyed.

We should know that this is true.

Some of our greatest buildings fell at the hands of determined terrorists.

We are still trying to get over it.

Our national psyche is on edge in anticipation of the next terrorist attack.

So when Jesus talks about magnificent stones being flipped on their side, we know all about that.

We know the fear of nations rising up against nations. We know about being afraid of those whose terror knows no boundaries.

There are many things that have changed since the time of Jesus.

But, our fears remain the same.

We still live in frightening times.

It's easy to talk about the end of the world in theory.

We can even make jokes about it like R.E.M. did in their song.

"That's great. It starts with an earthquake.

It's the end of the world as we know it."

But, when it's our world that is threatened,

when it's our world that is tumbling down, then the end of the world is not so funny.

When that happens, we need comfort and reassurance.

TESTIFY!

How can we have faith when we are confronted by enemies who want to destroy us?

Where can we find the words to answer those who want to snuff out the hope of a new day?

Jesus told his disciples that when they faced the time of trial, they didn't have to write a speech.

They didn't have to hire a defense lawyer.

The Lord would give them the words they needed.

The words of Jesus would give them a defense that even the rulers of the world would not be able to contradict.

Notice that the words of Jesus have the power to change things.

The words of Jesus can befuddle the politicians.

The words of Jesus can bring an end to the kingdoms of this world and replace them with the kingdom of God.

Cataclysmic times can be very frightening, but they can also offer the opportunity to testify. Let's think about a few end of the world signs that we have experienced and how we responded.

When the earthquake struck Haiti, this church and many other churches gave generously.

We testified.

When war or disaster threatens the survival of people near or far away, through the Presbyterian Disaster Fund we send aid.

We testify.

When nations rise up against nation, Christians take their cue from Jesus, the Prince of Peace and we preach peace instead of conflict.

We testify.

And when a nation is deeply divided and angry, when people who used to love each other now won't talk to each other, when people feel betrayed by their own family members, we preach forgiveness and reconciliation.

We testify.

We preach the perfect love that casts out fear.
(1 John 4:18)

Don't be afraid brothers and sisters when nations rise up against nations.
Don't be afraid when police officers are ambushed.
Don't be afraid when churches are burned and vandalized.

This is our opportunity to testify.

This is not who we are.
This not what we believe.
We will not succumb to the fear.
We will not succumb to the name calling.

We don't listen to those words.
We only listen to the words of Jesus.
Those words and those words alone give us the answer we seek.

Don't waste your time looking at fancy buildings and listening to the words of skillful politicians.
They tell us what we want to hear, but they never tell us what we need to hear.

Now is the time for us to testify.

STEADFAST LOVE

These cataclysmic times give us an opportunity to preach the gospel. The uncertainty of these days have prepared our hearts to hear words of comfort from our Lord.

The Temple may fall ... the earth may shake ... the nations may rage ... but the "steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.
His mercies never come to an end.

They are new every morning.”

Great is his faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22-23)

I preached on that passage not long ago.

Do you remember what was going on when the prophet wrote those words?

It was during the Babylonian captivity.

It was when the Temple fell and the hopes of God’s people were totally dashed as they were taken into captivity.

But, right in the middle of a book called Lamentations, a funeral dirge, hope breaks out.

There is no doubt.

Our Temples will fall.

Our hopes and dreams for the future will be dashed.

But, the steadfast love of the Lord lasts forever.

FALSE MESSIAHS

In this passage Jesus talks about all these cataclysmic events ... earthquakes, nations rising up against nation, dreadful signs in the heaven ... political upheaval.

And yet, all these terrible things do not signal the end.

However, these events do set the stage for false Messiahs.

Jesus said that those who claim to be the Messiah in this age of uncertainty are to avoided like the plague.

“Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them.”

These false Messiahs are dangerous.

And how do you know that they are false?

Their words do not line up with the words of Jesus.

They claim power that does not belong to them.

SINNERS ALL

I saw an interesting quote this week.

It was from one of those NFL football players that had been taking a knee during the National anthem.

Many of us, including the president elect have been very critical of these actions.

So a reporter asked this football player what he thought about the election, obviously hoping to get yet another controversial statement. But, his reply was not what they expected.

He said something like,

“I think we’ll be okay. We need to give our new president a chance. He’s obviously an imperfect man, but we’re all imperfect. We can’t expect perfection from our leaders. There was only one perfect man who walked this earth.”

Testify brother.

Tell the world the truth they are not ready to hear.

We’re all imperfect.

We’re all sinners.

Our leaders are not perfect people that we can put on a pedestal. They are flawed human beings just like us ... people in need of God’s grace and salvation.

We’re all in the same boat.

And no matter how big we build our buildings and no matter how much money and power we amass, it can all be taken away.

It will be taken away.

But, one thing will not be taken away:

The eternal promise of God in Christ Jesus.

This hope lasts through wars and rumors of war.
This hope lasts through betrayal.

This hope is even greater than death.
That's where we need to look if we want salvation.

NOT A HAIR OF YOUR HEAD

In our lesson for today Jesus tells his disciples some sobering things.

They will be hated.
They will be put on trial.
They will be put in prison.
And some of them will be put to death.

But, in the very next verse he says,
"But not a hair of your head will perish."

"Wait a minute Jesus. How can both of those things be true?"

Every morning a lot of my hairs perish!
And almost every morning a lot of my dreams perish as well."

Well, maybe we have to look at this as a symbol of hope.

Many things perish in our world ... including us.
But, the God who created heaven and earth can recreate us.

The God who created heaven and earth can change us into the men and women we are supposed to be.

We believe in salvation.
We believe that imperfect people can be changed by the power of God's grace.
We believe in a new heaven and a new earth.

We talked about this last week before communion.
We believe in a time when all God's people will sit down at the same table and share the feast of God's grace.

PATIENCE

And how do we express that hope in how we live today?

Jesus put it this way, "By your endurance you will gain your souls."

That word translated "endurance" can also mean "patience" and a "willingness to wait for the kingdom that comes."

In other words, let's not rush the time of judgment.
Let's hang in there with the promises of God.
And let's hang in there with people as well.

God has done some amazing things with people in the past.

He's turned persecutors into apostles.
He's turned frightened disciples into bold evangelists.

And he can still change people today.

We need to believe that ... because it is that belief that can save our soul.
If you can't find it in your heart to forgive the sins of others, where does that leave you?

Forgiveness has to be a two way street.
That's what Jesus told us in his model prayer.
We pray that prayer each week because we need to.

This stuff doesn't come naturally to us.

But, each week are reminded that patience is more than a virtue.
It is how God saves us.

We need to stop admiring the stones of the Temple and start following Jesus.

He leaves no stone unturned.
He brings in the kingdom envisioned by the prophet,
a kingdom where justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.

The prophet also told of a time when the wolf would lie down with the lamb.

Right now wolves are eating the lambs, and we need to do all we can to stop it.

But, we also need to pray that God will change the nature of the wolves.

We can't do that.

But, God can.

I'm glad that election season is once again followed by Advent.

We need Advent every year, but this year we need it more than ever.

We need to remember the kingdom that comes.

We need to remember that God is, as the prophet Isaiah put it, doing a "new thing".

This is indeed the end of the world as we know it.

But, that's not a bad thing.

That's a good thing.

We need a new heaven and a new earth.

Don't look to the big impressive buildings for salvation.

Look to the little town of Bethlehem.

There in a stable

... in a manger

... in a feeding trough filled with hay for animals

... the salvation of God is coming ... coming soon.

That's good news indeed.

Amen.