

*WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON*  
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in Brookfield, Connecticut  
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Text: 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 asked 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 led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, '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 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 withstand 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."

It's hard to believe, but Advent is coming up fast. It starts the week after Thanksgiving. Advent is not only the start of a new liturgical season, it's also the start of a new liturgical year. And as we make that transition, a lot of pastors will undoubtedly breathe a sigh of relief. That's because the liturgical year always wraps up with some pretty heavy readings. On these last few Sundays, the lectionary is always full of scary predictions about what's going to happen in the future. Like in the gospel reading this morning. Jesus mentions pretty much every major calamity there is: wars, earthquakes, famines, plagues, dreadful portents, and bloody persecutions.

It's no wonder pastors get a little weary this time of year. It's hard to find good news in images like that. But that's not to say it's impossible. You just have to look a little bit harder and not let all the doom and gloom distract you. The thing about these apocalyptic readings is, beyond all the scary stuff, there's always a ray of hope. There's always a promise that God won't leave us to perish. If we can stay focused on who we

are and what we're about through all the trials and tribulations, a new day will dawn. That's the ultimate message.

In the text we have in front of us today, Jesus does indeed paint a pretty disturbing picture. It's like something out of a disaster movie. But notice where he's standing as he's talking about all these "signs from heaven." He's standing in the temple in Jerusalem. He's there with the disciples, and they're marveling at the size and splendor of the buildings—the giant stone walls, the massive columns, the beautiful courtyards. And it's true that the temple in Jesus' day was a magnificent structure—one of the wonders of the ancient world. King Herod had just spent nearly 50 years renovating it and doubling the size of the original complex. Along with his cruelty, Herod was known for his lavish building projects, and this was the jewel in his architectural crown.

So the disciples are wandering around like a bunch of tourists with their mouths hanging open, and when Jesus sees how awestruck they are, he goes over and tells them, "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."

"Oh, really?" they say. "When will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" They're shocked. They can't believe what they're hearing. From their perspective, the destruction of the temple is unimaginable. In their eyes, the place is a fortress. It was built to last for thousands of years.

And yet from the perspective of the gospel writer, several decades later, the temple was already history. Luke was written around the year 80—50 years after this reading takes place, and ten years after the Romans invaded Palestine to put down a Jewish revolt. It was a turning point for the whole region. The Romans marched in, surrounded Jerusalem, and eventually broke through the walls and destroyed it. And when they did, they made a special point of tearing down the temple, which was the heart of Judaism. And when I say they tore it down, I mean they they tore it down to the ground. By the time they were finished, it was just like Jesus said: Not one stone was left upon another.

For the Jewish people, the war with the Romans was a catastrophe, the worst thing that could've happened. When the dust finally settled, they no longer had a land to call their own, and many of them entered what's called the Jewish diaspora. They scattered far and wide and settled in small pockets all across the Empire.

And for Luke and his fellow believers, the war was a big deal as well. They were a tiny fledgling community, maybe a few dozen people, trying to survive in a world that had been thrown into turmoil, a world that was going through social upheavals, a world where nothing was certain anymore. So imagine how they must have felt when they heard Jesus make this prediction. It must have hit home in a very personal way. They were living in the wake of the events he was describing. They were facing the reality he was warning the disciples about. And that was not by accident.

Luke included this story in his gospel at least in part to encourage people in his own day—to give them something to hang on to; to remind them that even though the world had lost its mind, and everything was up in the air, they were still followers of Jesus, and they still had a job to do.

And what job was that?

In the reading, Jesus tells the disciples that all these coming disasters will give them “an opportunity to testify”—an opportunity to stand up and witness to God’s goodness and mercy, God’s power and strength, even in the face of adversity, even in the face of suffering, even in the face of death. So when the clouds started gathering, and the winds started howling, and the rains started beating down, that’s what they were supposed to do. That was their job.

And now that the storm is finally here, that’s the job of everyone in Luke’s audience, as well: to keep living by faith; to keep showing the world that God is trustworthy and true; to keep proclaiming that what’s going on is not what’s really going on. What’s going on is, things are falling apart; what’s really going on is, God is still at the helm. What’s going on is, the world is hopelessly broken; what’s really going on is, God’s purposes are still unfolding. What’s going on is, God’s people are hanging on by a thread; what’s really going on is, God won’t let a hair on their heads perish.

So looking around us today, there’s no shortage of problems in the world, and there’s no shortage of people preaching Armageddon. Wars, earthquakes, famines, plagues, persecutions—we can pretty much check all those boxes. But that’s not who we are or what we’re about, as Christians. Our job is not to join the chorus of voices proclaiming the end is nigh. Our job is to look a little bit harder and not get distracted by all the doom and gloom. Our job is to see the ray of hope and remember the promise.

Our job is to be the one voice out there crying in the wilderness, telling everyone that beyond all the realities we see in front of us everyday, there’s a larger reality, a deeper reality, one that’s always playing out in and through our lives even when we don’t perceive it; one that’s always guiding our steps even when we’re lost and afraid. God is faithful even when everything around us is coming unglued, and our job is to keep telling that truth, and to keep living that truth, because when all is said and done, it’s the only truth that matters.

So with only a couple weeks left until Advent, let’s carry that truth with us into the new year, and let’s keep telling world what’s really going on. Amen.