

November 17, 2019 Second Sunday in Advent

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Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas

GOSPEL

Luke 21:5-19

The holy gospel according to Saint Luke, the twenty-first chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

⁵When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, [Jesus] 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.”

⁷They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” ⁸And 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.” ¹⁰Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; ¹¹there 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. ¹³This will give you an opportunity to testify. ¹⁴So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; ¹⁵for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. ¹⁶You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. ¹⁷You will be hated by all because of my name. ¹⁸But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Right about this time every year...when there's a chill in the air...and pumpkin spice everywhere...Jesus gets in the spirit of the season...tells us to gather round his armchair by the fireplace...and says, "Children...come close...it's time for a story...about the end of the world.

Jesus is not going to be pitching the next successful Lifetime holiday movie. Clearly. Unless they're going to start going in a very different direction.

Now...whenever we find ourselves in conversations about the apocalypse...our first move should be to look around at the world right here and now....because we tend to come to these stories (or they tend to come to us) when we need to become more deeply rooted in our own time and place. (And yes...I would apply that statement to John's book of Revelation and Zombieland.)

As we look to Luke's gospel today, we can probably gain a lot from remembering what the time and place was like when Jesus first spoke these words. He was standing among his closest friends who have been journeying with him now for quite some time...and they had entered the center of the universe as they knew it - the temple in Jerusalem.

The temple is an important place to the writer of Luke. A good place. A place where God shows up. It would also have been the most magnificent architecture that most of the people there had ever seen or even heard of.

And even though it was the earthly home of God...the people also knew (if they allowed themselves to remember) that it was not invincible. This temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians when God's people were led away into captivity and exile almost 600 years earlier.

Another thing about this great building where they are standing when Jesus begins to predict reality as they know it crumbling...it had recently been renovated...by Herod the Great. Those large stones the people are pointing to? They had been laid at the command of the same king who would command that all the baby boys Jesus' age be slaughtered a few years later.

You kiss God's temple with that mouth, Harry? Huh.

And...just before Jesus speaks these world-tumbling words, he has watched that famous nameless poor widow put her last two coins into the temple's treasury. And he has spoken words of judgment against those who could be so much more generous but aren't...those whose failure to live generously contributed to this woman's destitution...and have failed to protect her.

It is literally just after Jesus says the words "She out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on" that we hear "some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God." Almost as if they have tuned Jesus out while he's ranting and they've turned back to take their selfies and look at their tourist maps...while they step over the beggars at the entry to the beautiful building they came to see.

This temple - this house for God...is full of people who are stepping over the beauty of humanity that has been discarded at the gates...in order to marvel at the beauty that has been built by looking away from their suffering.

And they know it.

Because people aren't so different now than they were then...So the reason I know that they knew what was going on their world...because I know we know what's going on in ours. I know that we also know in our guts that we keep so much suffering in our peripheral vision so we can just keep trying to get by in the comfort we can manage. So we can find joy in the beautiful things without taking full account of the sufferings, injustices and struggles. And the

stones are too huge to imagine anything changing anyway, right? We don't believe any of this can be torn down. We may as well do our best in an imperfect world. Everything is simultaneously more fragile and more immutable than we can bear.

I mean...what could we possibly do about another school shooting? About the neighbors who sleep under the highway? Or in their cars? Even on frigid nights like the ones we've had recently?

What could we do?

But you see, Jesus isn't just speaking these words out of judgment. They are also words of hope. Because the people to whom he is speaking...aren't just the ones doing the harm...they are also the ones being harmed.

And if we're honest...those two groups aren't so easy to separate anyway...are they? Often times we're both of those people at once - to different degrees. Aren't we?

Jesus is saying that things are changing...that even huge immovable things will change...will move. And...that it will be hard. And that people will show up with quick fixes and cheap promises...and that we should be skeptical...cautious...about rushing to believe every threat or promise that comes our way.

One of my colleagues who writes for the Living Lutheran lectionary blog, Cory Driver, said this reminds him of the professor he had who was known to say: "If you are eating a bowl of soup and someone rushes in, saying, 'The Messiah has come! Come and see!' First...finish your soup. Then go and see."

Or...put another way...Jesus might have been a fan of the recently re-popularized British slogan from World War II, "Keep Calm, and Carry On." He entreats us to trust what we know in our bones...to lean on truth in

changing and shaky times. Because change is coming. Full of hope and fear all at once.

So, yes, it is interesting to think about what this meant to those followers in Jerusalem - at "Herod's Temple" all those years ago. (And yes, he really did try to claim naming rights based on his renovation work.)

And, of course, in the years that followed there would be strife and famine and war...not that those things were so unusual. And the temple would also be destroyed, in the year 70...by the time this story was being spread in the growing movement of people who believed he had died and risen and changed everything.

Jesus' words must have felt so imminently heavy in their truth.

So, in addition to wondering what they meant at the time...I also wonder, what would those people think about how we read those words now? That we still find them fearful and hopeful and confusing...that we are still waiting for the fullness of the reign of God to arrive...?

If they were to have a window into our world...to see the history that has brought us here. I imagine they would be both amazed and horrified. They would think we were nearly magical with the technology we've created. They would see evil and goodness both played out on a scale they couldn't even comprehend. And they would see that...with all we have been through...with all we know now...we still have beautiful buildings...with beautiful broken siblings begging just outside the door. They would see we still haven't managed to be more or better than they are. Maybe they would be disappointed in us. Maybe we would just...recognize each other...

Maybe they would take heart to hear...that even though we haven't arrived...we've been on a journey with God. I imagine we could sit down to dinner and tell them how God has been with us...and ask them how God was

with them. And our stories would be both familiar and strange to each other. And I can't imagine that we wouldn't leave feeling even more amazed than someone looking up at the greatest building they had ever seen. Because instead of looking at stones upon stones...we would see each other...knowing about all the stones that have been set upon each other and torn down again...and how the broken people at the gates have been on a journey with God through it all.

And we will be still. Even when everything feels like its crumbling...not a hair of our heads will perish. Because God is with us...even when everything else is falling. Keep calm. Carry on. Finish your soup. Then go and see...and work...for the good of all God's children.

Because it turns out...maybe we can do more than we think. Perhaps there could be room inside for the strangers at the gate and under the bridge...maybe even here. Maybe even when the strangers are us. May we continue to live into the future God dreams of where these things are true.

Thanks be to God. Amen.