

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.”

Signs and Persecutions

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.”

(NRSV)

Although I have shared this message a couple of years ago – before the pandemic and between the devastating fires, insurrection, civil unrest and mass shootings – I feel it is more important today, than it was when I originally shared it.

When I was in high school, I joined a Fundamentalist church and I couldn't get enough information about the "End Times". I was enthralled by it. I had a whole library dedicated to the last days. These books were so clear about the rapture and what the world would be like right before Christ's return and they made you feel it was going to happen any day now!

As a young fundamentalist, I hoped for it to come. Even though I knew terrible things would happen, I believed it had to be that way in order for God's Kingdom to come.... Today, I believe I've matured in my faith journey since that time 40-years ago. That my understanding of what the unconditional love of God truly is.

In today's Gospel reading from Luke we tend to focus on the negative aspects of the scriptures. We easily hear the words of Jesus saying "...the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." We focus on the wars and insurrections, the nation rising against nation, the earthquakes, famines and plagues and whether we get our news from a paper or watch it on TV it is easy for us to say, "We are in trouble!" This is it – it's all over – the end!

If we stare at the glass of humanity, most of us would probably say it is half empty. But thankfully, Jesus sees the glass as half full. God *knows* the potential that humanity has otherwise He would not have wasted His time by sending us His Son to do some God-splaining to us! In today's reading, Jesus is calling his disciples to be willing to testify for humanity's sake because it desperately needs to hear about the way of living in the heavenly kingdom if we want any hope of making it *an inkling* of reality on earth.

The audience that Jesus was speaking to in the temple knew that they lived in dangerous times, they were occupied by the world's most powerful and vicious empire, and prophets (like televangelists) could be found on every street corner. He warns them that by following in his Way, they will be separated from family, arrested and persecuted by the state, and some of them would be put to death.

However, Jesus wants His disciples to understand that the reality of the world we live in is temporary and limited by our human perspective. But from the perspective of God's world there are no temporal or human limitations. The fears that we have, whether real or in our minds, are but a blip in time. And because God is in the midst of this, we have nothing to fear; and though we may suffer temporarily, we will gain our eternal souls.

It is during these times of trouble that Jesus wants us to focus on Him so that we may testify to those who need to hear about living in the Way of Jesus.

Presbyterian Pastor, Curtis Jones believes that though these nonviolent acts of waiting and testifying to one's persecutors sounds passive and weak, the "words and wisdom" of Jesus will bring transformation, both for those who proclaim and for those who hear. The moment Jesus gives the word and believers receive it, those believers become recipients of a divine incarnational power.

In his 1967 "Christmas Sermon on Peace", the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed:

I've seen too much hate to want to hate, myself, and every time I see it, I say to myself, hate is too great a burden to bear. Somehow we must be able to stand up against our most bitter opponents and say: "We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by *our* capacity to *endure* suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we will *still* love you.... But be assured that we'll wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day we will win our freedom. We will not only win freedom for ourselves; we will appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win *you* in the process and our victory will be a double victory."

Like Jesus, Dr. King understood the strength that power and love have when combined. He said, "Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love."

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus gives us the Great Commission to share the Good News with the world. To testify!!! To which many of us Christians respond, "I don't know what to say."

Susan Olson, Assistant Dean of Students at Yale Divinity School, reminds us that today's scripture points out that "the believer does not have to have a script or a plan; in fact, we are told not to plan our words ahead of time. Jesus will give us the words to speak and the wisdom to make those words matter."

Olson, also shares this story:

In the bleary and bleak days after the 2012 school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, parents and teachers repeated Fred Rogers's famous line in response to scary situations, which he attributed to his mother. "Look for the helpers," they said, alerting fearful children (and ourselves as well) to the plethora of first responders, volunteers, and professional helpers on the scene. Even in circumstances unfathomably painful, this tiny phrase provided comfort to anxious children. In the weeks following that horrific day, children saw helpers everywhere. Children spied police officers, nurses, and volunteers who had previously blended into the woodwork of everyday living. "Look, mom, another helper!" Olson heard a young child exclaim as he entered school. These helpers had been there all along, but children were **now** trained to seek them out, to find their calming faces in times that were uncertain and shifting.

Olson concludes that perhaps today's passage provides the same message. "'Look to the helper,' Jesus calls us. Look to the one helper, the one who shall give us words to speak when our tongues are in knots, who shall protect the very hairs on our heads. This helper of all helpers, Jesus, does not offer us sweet platitudes in this passage. He does not promise a life inoculated from trial or pain. Instead, in the middle of those trials he offers us a voice and a safety net far more secure than what this world can provide. Our task is to stand firm and look." ...

Amen.