

Today’s lesson is read from Luke 21:5-19

Hear the words from Luke:

Read Luke 21:5-19

“The Word of God for the people of God.”

“Thanks be to God”

Let us pray:

O Lord, let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart be acceptable, pleasing, and perfect in your sight, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Intro:

A man of enormous ambition, Herod the Great was probably one of the greatest kings of the post-Biblical period in Israel, but you wouldn't want your daughter to date him. He was ambitious, brutal, extremely successful; he allowed no opposition, either with family or with politics. He was ... a genius of [a] self-made man. Thanks to the political connections of his father, he was able to marry into the ruling family in Judea. And it was under his kingship that post-Biblical Israel really rose to its political and material heights in the early days of the Roman Empire. Herod was a successful client king, which meant that as long as he paid tribute to Rome and was on the correct side of any kind of Roman battle, he protected the political independence and liberty of Jews in Israel. And... he did that very well. He also advertised the success and wealth of his own regime and the importance of his people by having an incredibly ambitious building program ... some of the most beautiful buildings that we have still existing in the land of Israel were done under Herod. Of course, his great architectural gift to us today was what he did with the Temple in Jerusalem. According to the 1st century historian, Josephus, the Jerusalem temple of Jesus’s day was an awe-inspiring wonder. Rebuilt around 10 BCE by Herod.

The “Second” Temple in Jerusalem was the symbolic and, in a sense, political heart of the country.... But by building the Temple, Herod established a residence with Jewish history.... By rebuilding the Second Temple ... refurbishing it ... making it enormous and really one of the architectural marvels of the ancient world, he not only increased enormously the religious prestige of Judaism, but , if political history is in a sense the history of real estate development, he helped Judea to have a positive balance of trade. Jerusalem, then as now, was one of the major centers of tourism. Not only Jewish tourism, but gentiles as well would come up to Jerusalem.... The way to think of the Temple with Herod's vision, is to think of it almost like an airport not so much as a church. He created architecturally, a space that could accommodate an enormous number of pilgrims and tourists and interested others. And by doing this, he made a statement. Not only about his own country, but about the God of Israel.

however by the time Luke puts the finishing touches on these verses, the temple’s destruction has already happened. Luke’s Gospel is dated to about 85 ce, 15 years or so after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in 70 ce, which means that for us what Jesus says in Luke 21:5-6 is more a reflection on the temple’s destruction than a prediction of it. Luke uses the destruction of this magnificent temple to make a statement on the not so everlasting of human achievement. In response to their wonder at the temple’s beauty, Jesus attempts to divert the attention of his audience from their fascination with “these things that you see” (21:6). Their focus should be on something else. What, exactly, is not specified, but immediately before this exchange Jesus drew

attention to a poor widow in the temple (21:1-4). Perhaps according to Luke, Jesus thinks his audience should focus their attention on the poor, not on the temple building. But those listening to Jesus teach in the temple, however, remain concerned with what will happen to the building (Luke 21:7). In response, Jesus moves from discussing a specific catastrophic event to more general statements about the coming of false prophets, wars, and other calamities (21:7-12).

This passage then from Luke becomes apocalyptic. If you’re like me, your cultural references for “apocalypse” probably include Marvel superhero movies, the “Left Behind” fiction series, and the Book of Revelation. When I hear the word, I think of interplanetary warfare, the four horsemen, vacant-eyed zombies lurching through decimated neighborhoods, and the wholesale nuclear destruction of the planet. But in fact, “apocalypse” means something quite different. An apocalypse is an unveiling. A disclosure of something secret and hidden. To experience an apocalypse is to experience fresh sight. Honest disclosure. Accurate revelation. It is to view reality as we’ve never seen it before. In this sense, what Jesus offers his disciples in the remainder of this week’s Gospel reading is an apocalyptic vision. He invites them to look beyond the grandeur of the temple, and recognize that God is more than a building. The temple is not the epicenter of his salvific work; God is not bound by mortar and stone. God exceeds every built building, every institution, every mission statement, every strategic plan, and every symbol human beings create in his name.

Apocalyptic literature uses unsettling language and imagery as a means to assure the faithful that they should keep their trust in God even when facing the most challenging of circumstances. Sure enough, while describing the terrible events, Jesus tells his listeners not to be afraid (Luke 21:9). There is nothing particularly original or specific about Jesus’ “predictions” here. Every age has its own false prophets, wars, natural catastrophes, and so on. We will misread 21:7-11 if we think Jesus is describing a specific set of calamities. The point is that when bad things happen -- and they will -- we should “not be terrified” (21:9) or follow anyone proclaiming these are signs of God’s judgment and the end (21:8). Instead, we should trust that God remains present in our lives.

So then, what are we to do when everything comes tumbling down?

“Do not be terrified,” he says, when the earth shakes, and nations make war, and imposters preach alluring gospels of fear, resentment, and hatred. Don’t give in to despair. Don’t capitalize on chaos. Don’t neglect to bear witness. God is not where people often say God is. God doesn’t fear-monger. God doesn’t sensationalize. God doesn’t thrive on human dread.

So avoid hasty, knee-jerk judgments. Be perceptive, not pious. Imaginative, not immature. Make peace, choose hope, cultivate patience, and incarnate love as the world reels and changes. Expect things to get hard. And then expect them to get harder. Endure even when they do. Know that God is near, no matter what the world looks or feels like. Speak the truth, trusting that God’s Spirit is alive and present in our

acts of bearing witness. Be faithful until the end, because God is still — always and everywhere — a God of love.

For me, this is the great challenge of the Gospel. Not simply to bear the apocalypse, but to bear it well. To bear it with the courage, calm, and faith Jesus calls me to practice in this passage.

For many of us, this has been an emotionally and spiritually exhausting few years. We need look no further than the daily news to see apocalyptic images scarier than any Hollywood might produce. In California, thousands of acres of land are burning from massive wildfires. Elsewhere, families are starving, or living on the streets, or struggling in the shadow of relentless war, or suffering racial or sexual violence, or attempting to cross a national border because the horrors they’re leaving behind are worse than the dangers that lie ahead.

In this troubling context, it’s easy to despair. Or to grow numb. Or to let exhaustion win. But it’s precisely now, now when the world around us feels the most apocalyptic, that we have to respond with resilience, courage, and truthful, unflinching witness. It’s precisely now, when systemic evil and age old brokenness threaten to bring us to ruin that we have to testify without fear and without shame to the Good News that is the Gospel. Yes, we are called to bear witness in the ruins, but rest assured: this will end in joy. By our endurance, we will have eternal life. By our faithfulness we will be lifted up. So do not worry! God will not let you His Creation tumble into ruin!¹

¹ Adapted from Debie Thomas, *By Your Endurance* <https://www.journeywithjesus.net>

Let us pray:

Dear Heavenly Father, As we approach the table of grace on this World Communion Sunday, I invite everyone here to allow the Holy Spirit to take root in your hearts. I encourage you to remember the generations that have come before and to rekindle the gift of God that is within you. By receiving the bread and cup you abide near to God and have the promise of the Holy Spirit and eternal life. Praise be to God who gives us such gifts and abides in us! Amen.

Offering

Generous God, may the faith of our ancestors continue to live through us as we present our gifts today.

Bless those who, through receiving support from the World Communion Sunday offering, will pursue their dreams and grow in your love and grace. Amen.

Benediction

We have praised God, been fed and nourished, and are sustained in our faith.

As we go from here, let us respond to the holy calling:

to be hope,

to invite others to the table of grace,
to share our resources and
to be a voice for justice, sharing the words
and teachings of Jesus Christ.