

It feels like the lectionary has struck again. I've known for a while now that the text I'd be preaching today on was the apocalypse from Luke's gospel, because I had to preach on it at VST chapel this week. I have to confess that I was not entirely enthusiastic, when I discovered a few weeks ago that I had agreed to do so--in my quickness to agree to the date, I'd forgotten to check the text... It's not that I'm exactly enthusiastic about it now, but it seems more appropriate than it did a few weeks ago.

I don't want to assume that everyone here today falls in the same relative spot on the political spectrum, but it needs to be said that for a great many of us, this has been a difficult week; it certainly has been for me. But the truth is that regardless of what we're feeling as individuals in the wake of this week's events, it's hard to look around and not see pretty objectively that this world we live in is indeed broken and groaning. Even if we were able to set things like elections aside, there's an awful lot to be fretted about. And I know the that the combined batting average for end-time predictors is .000, but even before Tuesday, I wouldn't have been overly critical of anyone who thinks maybe we we're getting close--at least, based on what Jesus has to say in Luke 21.

I know that in this passage there's all kinds of contextual stuff going on. I know that the destruction of Jerusalem is in the background of Luke's writing; it's already happened. I know that much of what Jesus says will happen does indeed happen in Acts; some of this could be read as foreshadowing Luke volume 2. But I'm convinced that the Word of God is living and active and it's not very hard to hear Jesus saying these things here and now, among us today. We know all about wars and rumors of wars, about rebellions and insurrections, of sickness and famine, terrifying things happening all throughout creation, nations that rise up and families that crumble. We've got plenty of division and destruction in our own

backyards, in our own lives. We know all about these things. Some of us *are* terrified. Perhaps, rightly so.

Because, really, even in the strangeness of this passage, Jesus is as clear-eyed about the world as we can dare to be. There's an unsettling realism in his words. It strikes me that he honestly and systematically dismantles most of our favorite saviours, the things that will keep us safe and sound: our beloved institutions, our most charismatic leaders, our confidence in our ability to protect ourselves from calamity and illness, our national hopes and dreams, our families and friends.

In a world as death-marred and sin-scarred as ours, there's just no question that wretched sorts of things will happen--that they do happen, have happened, are happening. We've no business pretending otherwise. As people seeking to be faithful to the God who meets us in the ash heap, whose concern is for the broken hearted and the vulnerable, absenting ourselves from the suffering of the world isn't an option. If we're going to deal with God, indifference to the world God loves is off the table. Dealing with the God who confronts us in Jesus compels us to be honest about the world and its brokenness, and honest about our own brokenness.

And yet, the thing that I couldn't shake as I prayed through this passage over the past few days is not so much the disaster of things, but Jesus' insistence that right in the middle of it all is the time for testimony. Not just the time; the opportunity! (Thanks a bunch.) I say I *couldn't* shake that 13th verse, because I really wanted to. It reminds me of that bit in the first chapter of James where he says, "Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but pure joy, 'cause it's building your character." That's always struck me as questionable pastoral advice. Maybe he's not wrong, but I've never actually managed to tell someone who's suffering,

how lucky they are to be having their endurance and maturity built up. It's never seemed especially helpful in the moment.

So, to suggest that suffering and frustration, division, war, sickness, betrayal and brokenness present a great *opportunity* feels dismissive somehow. And it can seem especially suspect coming from someone like me, who's got every advantage in the world and knows precious little about real suffering.

But there it is. And of course, it's on the lips first of the One whose collision course with the world ends inevitably at the cross. *His* words and *his* actions are indistinguishable. And I think that the more we sit with this particular word, which we might risk calling a promise, the more we see that it's not about my--or anyone else's--inadequacy to preach it, or whatever feelings well up when we hear it, but about the trustworthiness, the faithfulness of the One who says it.

Fred Craddock says of this and other apocalyptic texts like it, that they are "a dramatic witness to the tenacity of faith and hope among the people of God." That to hear them, to pray them is to insist on looking squarely at the world as it is, while refusing to deal with the world outside of the context of God's saving, restoring, new-making grace, outside of God's astounding faithfulness. The wild claim is that there is nothing in all of creation that is beyond the bounds of God's action and God's love.

When Jesus speaks these jarring words among us, what is going on--all the muck and wonder of these lives, in this world--is mixed with what is *really* going on--God's determination that all things will be made new; that against all odds, the cross *will* lead through to resurrection; that sin and death *will not* have the last word on us, but love and life will. This is a word for a tenacious, outrageous faith, a profound trust that God really is able and willing to do more in us and through us

than we can ever ask or imagine. It's a reminder that we don't look to the hills--not Parliament, Capitol, or any other--for help and hope, but that our hope is in the God who made heaven and earth and who will make heaven and earth new.

I recently got some insight from a rather unexpected place. It was a quotation from an Anne of Green Gables novel, *Anne's House of Dreams*, in which Miss Cornelia, a pillar of the local mainline congregation, asks her friend Susan about another woman's health. "Oh," said Susan, "I'm afraid she's going to have to rely on the Lord now." "Oh, no!" Miss Cornelia responded, "Surely it isn't as bad as all that!"

I think it really is. And I think we need more than a surface kind of hope that God will make something of all this, when/if we get our stuff together. We need the sort of radical trust that allows us to know that the One who calls us to give our lives for his sake, and for the sake of this broken and beloved world, really does promise abundant life in return--not just that things will work out according to the best of our will and effort, but that we are in cahoots with the God whose Word of love for us and all creation can't, in the end, be withstood or contradicted.

Perhaps the most challenging part of Jesus' word, the real reminder of our deep dependence on him, is his instruction that when the world spins off kilter, we're to consciously avoid prescriptive responses. Don't default to ready-made answers. If we're going to truly witness to an alternative, even holy reality that is taking shape in our lives and in *this* world, we have to allow ourselves to be shaped in the will and way of the One whose thoughts aren't our thoughts, and whose ways aren't our ways. Instead of looking for our preferred outcomes, we're called, as Christians, to look to Jesus. "I will give you a mouth and a wisdom," he says.

To tell you the truth, that feels like both a threat and a promise. I mean, if we really look to Jesus, it means that we're looking more and more away from

ourselves. It means that we're loosening our grip on our way, on our expectations and desires, and grabbing hold of him instead. We're decreasing so that he can be increased.

If we're allowing Jesus' words to take shape not just in our mouths, or our heads, but in our whole lives, everything is at stake. After all, Christian discipleship heads straight to the cross. Jesus' words and wisdom didn't keep him from that. We are, unavoidably, a cruciform people; people ready to be broken for love of the world; ready, come what may, to witness to what we've seen and know, the hope that we have. Jesus doesn't try to trick us about this. He makes it pretty plain. I don't think Bonhoeffer was exaggerating when he said that when Christ calls us, he bids us "come and die."

And yet, as saints of every generation have seen and known, the more we look to Jesus--crucified, risen and reigning--the more we allow his will and way to shape the desires of our hearts and the way that we move through the world, the clearer the promise of it all becomes. I don't want to be idealistic, here--at least not in a "rosy glasses," "always look on the bright side" kind of way. In fact, if anything I'm more likely to be cynical. But I'm reminded of Chesterton's great line, slightly out of context, that, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it's been found difficult, and left untried."

There have been many moments recently when I have found it difficult not to be overwhelmed by Facebook posts and sound bites, by statistics and (Lord knows) my own righteous and self-righteous anger and sadness about the apparent way of things. There have been moments when I've forgotten the hope that we have, that the Light who has come into the world can never be quenched. But there's nothing in today's gospel reading that suggests that Jesus doesn't know that.

If he thought his followers were not subject to fear and distraction and distress, he

wouldn't have to tell us not to be afraid when everything goes sideways;
he wouldn't have to remind us that he is with us, ready to give us what we need--
that our witness is not to a God who keeps at a safe and heavenly distance, but the
God who insists on being with us, the God whose glory is to have heaven's
kingdom of hope and peace and joy and love come in this world, in our lives, as it
is in heaven.

If he thought that would be an easy road, he wouldn't have to remind us that we are
called, to paraphrase Shane Claiborne, to dance the outrageous and peculiar dance
of Jesus at all times ("Whatever you do in word or deed, do it to the glory of God
the Father, in the name of Jesus Christ"), even until they crucify us for it; because
we'll rise to dance again!

And so to God, who by the power at work within us--the same power that raised
Christ from the dead--is able to do abundantly far more in us and through us than
all we can ask or imagine, to God be all glory in the Church, in our lives, in this
broken and beloved world, and in Christ Jesus, now and forever more.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Amen.