

Living from the Future
A Sermon on Luke 21:5-19
Proper 28
November 17, 2019

Introduction

We are nearing the end of the year on the church calendar. The lectionary gives us eschatological texts as we approach the end of the year. Eschatology is a combination of two Greek words, ἔσχατος, which means *last*, and λόγος, which means *the study of*. The study of the last. It turns our focus to the end.

Our Old Testament lesson is from Isaiah 65. God promises that Israel will be restored from exile in Babylon. It will be a new age in history. There will be a new heaven and a new earth. There will be no more weeping, no more lives cut short by illness or tragedy, no more war. The lion will lie down with the lamb.

Today's Gospel lesson is part of Luke's apocalyptic discourse. It is the clearest statement we have of Luke's eschatology. It takes place in the Temple. It is the last speech in Jesus' ministry before the Passion begins. You could argue that the lectionary ought to place it toward the end of Lent, but the end of the church year is a good place for it, too. It helps frame how we will look at the new church year, which begins with Advent in two weeks.

First Move: Preparing for the End

Some people in the crowd are marveling about the Temple. It was one of the wonders of the ancient world. The Second Temple, which was begun by Herod the Great, took 80 years to complete. It was a 35-acre complex. It was constructed of solid white stones that were 4 to 6 foot square. It would have been like building a pyramid. There were ornate sculptures and inscriptions worked into the outside walls. The gates were covered with gold that blinded your eyes when the sun shined on it.

Jesus predicts that the Temple will be destroyed. "Days will be coming when not a stone will be left standing upon a stone, and when it will all be thrown down."

How would we react if we heard that the most sacred building in America, the White House or the U.S. Capitol, would be torn down?

That turns the conversation to the end. The crowd asks two questions: When will this be, and what will be the signs of the end?

Jesus doesn't answer the first question. We know now that the destruction of the Temple will take place in the 66 to 70 C.E., about 35 years after Jesus is giving this speech outside the Temple. Scholars are divided about whether the historical Jesus actually predicted the destruction of the Temple.

Jesus talks instead about the signs that will accompany the destruction of the Temple. Luke may be drawing on traditional sources, such as Josephus, the Jewish historian, who was an eyewitness to the destruction of Jerusalem. Josephus wrote about the cosmic signs that occurred at the time: a star shaped like a sword stood over the city, a comet continued for a year, a cow gave birth to a lamb in the Temple. Josephus describes a false prophet who led 6,000 Jews into the Temple where they were consumed by fire.

Luke draws on these stories of cosmic signs as he describes the destruction of the Temple. Luke's Jesus says there will be false prophets, wars, earthquakes, famines and plagues. These are traditional prophetic images of the end times.

Luke's Jesus says that Jerusalem will be destroyed before the kingdom of God arrives. "For it is necessary for these things to happen first, but the end will not take place immediately."

The rest of today's text are exhortations that Jesus offers to the disciples on how to act while they are suffering through the end times. The lectionary leaves out the second half of the speech, which talks about the coming of the Son of Man and the signs that will accompany the coming of the Son of Man. The lectionary wants to put the focus on how we should act as the end times approach.

Jesus offers spiritual resources to deal with adversity and hardship. He tells the disciples to do three things: watch that you are not led astray by false prophets, do not get behind them and do not be frightened.

Times of war are also times of terror. People desperately seek security. They are easily seduced by strong men who offer to protect them or by smooth talking salesman who promise them false hope.

The surest way to avoid being misled is to follow Jesus' command not to be frightened. Trust that God will be working to bring about the kingdom of God, no matter how bleak things look.

Jesus warns the disciples: "They will lay their hands on you and they will persecute [you]. They will hand you over to the synagogues and prisons and bring you before kings and rulers on account of my name." Luke's Jesus is describing what will happen in the Book of Acts. The disciples will be brought before Jewish authorities and Roman authorities.

Jesus tells them not to prepare beforehand what to say. “I will give you a mouth and wisdom that the ones who are opposed to you will not be able to resist or contradict.”

Second Move: A New Age in History

When your life is on line, Jesus will come to your aid. What will save you? Your testimony: you will testify about the things that Jesus proclaimed. The Greek word for testimony, μαρτυρέω, can also be translated as witness. You will be a witness for the kingdom. You will be saved because you will be helping to bring about the kingdom through your words and your actions.

The kingdom of God is subversive. It challenges the way that society is structured. There is radical equality in Christ. Steve Patterson, who spoke here in March for Jesus Seminar on the Road, says that the earliest Christian creed may have been “Neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.” The apostle Paul draws on this creed in Galatians 3:28. There is no hierarchy in Christ. The early Christians modeled a society in which all people were equal in Christ. John Dominic Crossan says that when you start applying that in a world of slavery, patriarchy and patronage, you are shaking the foundations of Roman normalcy.

Jesus talks about the kingdom of God more than anything else. The kingdom of God is often misunderstood. It is not about the end of the world. It’s not about life in heaven after we die. It’s about a new age in history. It’s about life right here on earth.

John Dominic Crossan describes the kingdom of God as what the world would look like if God sat on Caesar’s throne. How would people act if they responded to God’s will instead of pursuing their own self interest? God cares for everybody. God treats everyone as God’s own children. What would the world look like if everyone looked at the world from God’s perspective. Everyone’s basic needs are met. Everyone cares for their neighbor. Everyone shares their possessions. Everyone invites the poor to dinner.

The kingdom of God is based on the Jewish idea of the restoration of the kingdom. The prophets spoke of the day of the Lord when God would deliver Israel from its enemies and restore the Davidic kingdom. It’s not the end of time, it’s the next stage in history. I asked Abby Jacobson, the rabbi at Emanuel Synagogue, about what the Messianic age means in contemporary Jewish thought. She said that it is very much rooted in life here on earth, not in the after life. A messiah from David’s line will sit on the throne and the Temple will be rebuilt. Israel will know peace. It

will take place when all Jews follow all the commandments. That is a very similar idea to the Christian belief that everyone will be fully responsive to God's will.

One of the tragedies in Christian history is that the idea of the kingdom of God was transformed in the second century into life in heaven. The good are rewarded and sent to heaven. The wicked are punished and suffer eternal torment in hell. A kingdom of the righteous here on earth is transformed into the communion of the saints in heaven. St. Peter holds the keys to the kingdom. The only way to get to heaven is through the church.

Lloyd Geering, a historical Jesus scholar, says that Jesus wouldn't believe his eyes to see what had happened to him in the second century through the 19th century. He would be delighted that beginning with the Social Gospel movement in the late 19th century, we are finally discovering something of what he was really all about. Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God and what we got was the church.

If people truly believe in the kingdom that Christ proclaims, they will live differently. Justo Gonzalez, a liberation theologian, says that the future causes much of the present. We are not wandering aimlessly. Enlightenment thinking has led many people to secularism, to see the world as a mechanized universe that is driven by random events, a series of chemical responses to stimuli. To paraphrase Stanley Hauerwas, another theologian, our lives are more than one damn thing after another. Our lives are shaped by the future that God promises us. If we see each person we meet as a beloved child of God, it will influence how we respond to them. If we believe that God will reconcile all people, we will act to heal the divisions between people instead of retreating into partisan tribes.

Gonzalez says that the white, mainline church prefers a gospel without eschatology. A gospel without hope for a new order. The great reversal does not seem real. It is naive. The lion will never lie down with the lamb. That is a fairy tale. Even more, the great reversal that Luke proclaims does not seem so great to us. As middle-class Americans, we have things pretty good the way things are.

If we take the good news seriously, eschatology and all, it will change the way we live. Eschatological hope is the future out of which we live. We will start living as kingdom people right now. We will be peacemakers right now. We will be pure in heart right now. We will be humble and gentle right now. People will be drawn to the good news by seeing how it affects the lives of Christians.

Third Move: Acting as if the Kingdom Were Already Here

Jesus encourages the disciples to stand firm. “You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair from your head will be lost. Gain your lives by your endurance.”

Jesus is telling the disciples that suffering comes with discipleship. The kingdom of God is an alternative vision of society. It conflicts with the normalcy of society. The disciples will be caught in that conflict. Their parents, brothers, relatives and friends will turn against them. They will carry their own cross by following Jesus. They will be spit upon and cursed. They will be thrown in prison. Some of them will die.

Will we endure suffering like that if we live for the kingdom right now? The status of Christians has changed. It is part of the water around here. Half of the people in the world call themselves Christians. We will not be persecuted just for being Christians. But how many Christians can claim to be disciples? How many are witnessing to the kingdom?

Part of the suffering we endure will be suffering that we create within ourselves. We will be pulling ourselves away from conventional wisdom and social conformity and turning toward God’s vision for humanity. We will turn away from our false self and toward our true self. We will no longer be so quick to admire the magnificence of the Temple. We will recognize it as a human achievement. It is beautiful, but it will not endure.

We may have to give up a few things that society values, such as the honor and power and wealth that come with certain jobs. We may spend less time with some family members. We may spend more time with people who are trying to build the Beloved Community. We may spend more time with the prisoner and the refugee.

We may have to give up big houses and big cars and cut back on air travel. We may have to try to reduce our carbon footprint or our children and grandchildren will inherit an unsustainable planet.

We may have to change our understanding of what it means to be church. People are drawn today to big buildings and big programs. Their pastors avoid speaking on political issues because they don’t want to offend anyone. Did Jesus offend people? Did Jesus have a big church building? “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” Luke 9:58 (NRSV).

We must turn our focus instead to the future that God is calling us to. What is God calling you to do? What is God calling this church to do? As we turn toward Advent, what can you do to prepare the way of the Lord?

Conclusion

If we fully commit ourselves to discipleship, it will be the end of the world as we know it. That is a good thing. We will open ourselves up to a new heaven and a new earth. We will be living from the future that God promises.

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