

November 17, 2019 - Pentecost 23C

“Guided by Luke: The Meaning that Makes Us” - Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Luke 21:5-28

We are at the end of Pentecost, if you can believe it. Next Sunday is Christ the King Sunday, which heralds the end of the liturgical year and the beginning of the new year. December 1st is the first Sunday of Advent in Year A.

Since we have come through a whole liturgical cycle, we hear about the coming of the end today. Today’s text is called an “Apocalyptic”. This should be a familiar word to many of you in the modern day. For some of you, the Left Behind series of books put the fear of the future into your hearts. For others, it might be listening to Jim Bakker, John Haggee and Pat Robertson on religious television. For still others, haunting memories of Hal Lindsey’s *Late Great Planet Earth* movie may still linger. The end is near and you better be ready.

Back in 999 AD, the fear was so strong that whole villages would follow the monks and priests who promoted the end of the world. Some of the monks would flagellate themselves, meaning they would use strips of leather with nails in them to mortify the flesh, to destroy the body for the sake of the spirit, and would march through the streets whipping their backs and arms in preparation for Jesus, who was coming in terror and judgment.

The end didn’t happen. The flagellants have become historical models for the histrionics of apocalypse. Maybe you thought the world was going to end in 2012 when the planets aligned, as predicted by the Mayan calendar. Maybe you thought the world was going to end a couple years ago when a cranky old radio preacher convinced people to leave their jobs and travel the land warning people because he had broken the Bible code of Revelation. Maybe you were like me, and projected your apocalyptic mindset onto the Y2K computer problem and saw the complete collapse of the modern world happening when computers couldn’t handle the transfer from 1999 to 2000.

The disciples in our reading today think they finally understand some things about all this. They know Jesus is a ‘*sign reader*’ and that he speaks in symbols and signs. And so when a conversation is happening about the Temple, Jesus prophecies about the coming collapse of the Temple.

‘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.’ (vs 6)

The disciples are excited. They nudge one another. “*Oh! I’ve got this! I understand what Jesus is doing! We have been with him long enough to know this!*”

So they ask Jesus, because they know he is speaking in signs and symbols, “*What signs do we look for so we know when this is happening, Jesus?*”

Signs and symbols always point away from themselves to something greater. Reading them is difficult because it requires knowing well the world in which we live, the trajectory of things that are moving in the culture, and the historical foundations for those signs and symbols. Training in sign-reading is part of what becoming a disciple of Jesus means.

The disciples could have asked, “*How will we make meaning of the signs and symbols that are coming?*”, which probably would be a better question. The answer, though, is still as difficult as Jesus’ answer today.

Jesus’ answer to the disciples reminds me of the story of Merlin, King Arthur’s mentor and the court magician for the Knights of the Round Table. The Arthurian legends are a recasting of the Christ story, and one of the aspects of Jesus is taken up by the character of Merlin. Merlin is a strange creature who suffers from a bizarre condition. Merlin lives his life in reverse. He was born in the future and is living his life backwards. Merlin passes in the opposite direction from everyone else; while Arthur and the knights are living from the past into the future, Merlin is living from the future into the past.

Living as Merlin does, he becomes a mind-bending agent in the story. If Merlin’s presence changes the future, and Merlin is living from that future, how does the future change because of the changes made in the present by Merlin? And what does that mean for how we remember the past?

This is how I think it is best to understand Apocalyptic writings and speech. Jesus is living into the present from the future, like Merlin. Jesus is living from the future into the present and the past. In that sense, Jesus expresses here today the true meaning of “Apocalypse”. *Apocalypse* is the Greek word for *revelation*, and that is why the last book of the Bible is called “*The Book of Revelation*”.

Jesus is revealing things, removing the veil. For the one who lives backwards through time, time becomes a *wibbly-wobbly, timey-wimey*¹ sort of thing that doesn’t really follow the rules of past, present, and future. It is much more fluid. Forward motion through what we call time becomes an illusion. Our perception of linear progress is how we have entrained ourselves to believe time moves forward. Jesus, however, is remembering

¹ from Doctor Who - <https://www.deviantart.com/suuie-chuu/art/Wibbly-Wobbly-Timey-Wimey-353269774>.

what has already happened even as we look for signs of those things that will happen. We are, in a very real way, living into Jesus' memories.

Think on these things for a moment.

Have I disrupted your sense of time and reality? Good. Because that is what Jesus is doing here. Reality, our shared consensus experience of what we experience as individuals and what we agree upon together, is not what it seems. Reality is impermanent. Reality is recursive - which means, reality doubles back on itself, folds into itself, and reflects itself.

This is why it is really hard to read the signs and symbols of the age. And so Jesus tells the disciples what NOT to listen to.

Do not be led astray. Do not go after people who think they know how these things will happen, these events that show I am returning on clouds of glory.

In other words, anyone who tells you they know it is the end of the world, the End Times as people like to call them, is a false prophet and a pretender who is seeking attention.

So many of us are what I call '**Catastrophists**'. These are people who thrive on coming catastrophes. All things lead to destruction.

I have a friend who is a doctor. She is a very caring, very intelligent doctor who has overcome many personal struggles to achieve some success in the field. For a long time, I used to tell her about physical concerns I had, or that Kate or Rhiannon were experiencing. Having spent some time as a closeted hypochondriac, this was not a particularly good part of our relationship. This doctor was a Catastrophist. At any given point during our friendship, I have had cancer, diverticulitis, a possible embolism. Kate and Rhiannon have almost died from Hodgkins Lymphoma, viral meningitis.

After about 20 years, I have quit telling her how I, or my family, are actually feeling.

Or perhaps you are a Catastrophist with regard to the situation unfolding in our nation's Capitol. Since we are very inexperienced with impeachment proceedings, it is really hard to know how to read the signs of the thing. That we have had three impeachment hearings in 50 years, though, can't be good, can it?

But if you are a Democrat, then the catastrophe is the normalization of corruption that is happening in our nation. For the Democrats, the catastrophe is the flagrant disregard for

the rule of law, a primary foundation of our democratic republic, enshrined in the Constitution.

If you are a Republican, the catastrophe is the unparalleled politicization of the system for the sake of personal agendas. For the Republicans, the catastrophe is the willful disregard of the will of the people in a fair election, as specified by our very own Constitution, the will of the people by way of their elected officials being the first foundation of our constitutional democracy.

The greatest catastrophe in all this, though, is that there is no longer any middle ground upon which a Democrat or a Republican can stand. The functional element of a constitutional democracy is to be able to come together to find points of compromise for the sake of the nation, not compromise that lowers things to the bottom, but compromise that aims above and beyond our common differences for the sake of our better selves as Americans.

So first and foremost, Jesus tells us to not listen to the Catastrophists and their predictions. He says in vs 9, “*When you hear of wars and insurrections, **do not be terrified.***” If an apocalyptic text tells us anything, it is that empires, nations, governments rise and fall and the only point of permanence for us is trusting in God, who does not live in accordance to our understanding of history and time, but participates in our time and history, nonetheless. So let go of your fear of the future, and trust the Son of God who lives from the future to the present in order to transform and redeem the past.

Secondly, Jesus says that any difficulty his followers suffer should be framed into a positive possibility. Those difficulties are an opportunity to testify to the Risen Christ. And the interesting part of that is vs 14: “*So make up your minds NOT to prepare your defence in advance, for I will give you words and wisdom that will not be contradicted.*”

I interpret this to mean that we need to quit trying to figure out the future Jesus and God have in mind for us and instead live into this present time trusting that, when needed, God and Christ will speak on our behalf. Trust the future of God and the future from which Christ has lived into our present.

When we are pursued by forces which are bent on our destruction, we are to trust completely in the Lord. Even in the presence of hate and betrayal. Jesus says to the disciples, “*By your endurance you will gain your souls*” (vs 19). Paul says a similar thing in Romans 5:

we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us (vss 5:3-5).

These are verses also referring to persecution, pursuing others because of their faith. All of us came here today without having to dodge police, guns, bombs, or protestors. All of us will celebrate Christmas here together and with our families without interference. An argument at work, or at the grocery store about whether to say "*Merry Christmas*" or not is not persecution and is an insult to Christians suffering persecution around the world today, in Nigeria, in Iraq, in Gaza, in India, in North Korea and China, in Myanmar, in Burkina Faso. So here is a quick response if you end up having to defend your use of the phrase "*Merry Christmas*". You can say, "*I appreciate your concern, but I say Merry Christmas on behalf of those who cannot say it because of persecution and imprisonment for their beliefs around the world.*" Now you are following Jesus' lead in today's reading, and you are not fighting with people as if you share the experience of our persecuted brothers and sisters.

So, don't be scared, and see any resistance to your faith as an opportunity to testify, if not for your sake, then on behalf of those who cannot.

And finally, when the signs come together in an unmistakable way which points to *the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and glory (vs 28)*, you, o Child of God, need only **stand up, stand tall, and raise your head, and welcome your redemption**. How will we know that moment?

I don't know. I really have no idea.

I have two prayers when I think about verses like this.

My first is that I will recognize Jesus when he returns, and not be led astray by imposters. The reason that is my prayer is because I have shown myself to be vulnerable to imposters and spiritual posers in the past. I can be easily swayed by the mystical and magical.

My second prayer is that I will be *left behind*, because Jesus made himself known to those who were left behind by the culture and the religion of his day. If all these disasters and catastrophes are the predictors and predecessors of Jesus' return, then please, O Lord, leave me with the Left Behind, because those are the people to whom Jesus showed himself when he was here the last time. That is who I want to be with when it all goes down.

Those prayers tell me something, though, and I think it is part of what Jesus is imparting to the disciples today. Since we don't know when Jesus is returning, how do we know the time isn't right now? If Jesus is like Merlin and living in reverse, then maybe this point in time, this history happening right now, is the Jesus memory we are living into. Just like every moment before this one, all the signs are pointing to Jesus and his return, and that moment is right now, because right now is Jesus' memory of the future and our past is being redeemed even now as Jesus lives every deeper into history.

If that is the case, then these end things have already begun to take place - again, just as they did in 70AD, 90AD, 999AD, 1999AD, and today. So let us all stand up and raise our heads. Let us welcome the Lord, the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, for our redemption, even now, is drawing near.

Amen.