

Luke 21: 5-19 To Tell of Their Hope

When we were following Jesus and his disciples on their journey towards Jerusalem, we listened to Jesus teaching through the parables, using the images like loaves of bread, coins, sheep, annoying neighbors.... From this illustrative world of parables full of images from our everyday life, we are thrown into the wild world of apocalyptic traditions that deal with the end times.

This shift is a bit disorienting. Unlike parables, the language of apocalyptic literature uses unsettling imagery to reveal God's purpose for the world, and therefore, no matter how disturbing and distressing these images are, they contain the message of hope. We are now in Jerusalem, where God's purpose to redeem this world will unfold. Let us listen for that word of hope for us this morning.

Today, Jesus is not only in Jerusalem but in the Temple. The Temple in Jesus's time was the Second Temple that had been rebuilt after the Babylonian exile, and then the notorious Herod the Great expanded and made it more elaborate only a few decades before Jesus was born. It was opulent and magnificent. It was the radiant center of the religious life and a glorious symbol of the identity of the Jewish people.

To the unsuspecting admirers of the Temple, Jesus says "the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another." That's the first thing we hear Jesus say in today's pericope. And the last thing we hear him say is "But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls." 'Not one stone will be left,' 'but not a hair of your head will perish.' And what do we have in between? Chaos and suffering.

God's Word of Hope is for us who live in the time of chaos, time of false prophets, time of war and insurrection, time of natural disasters and pandemics, and a time when we can be persecuted and even killed, even, if we try to follow Jesus's example of radical hospitality and inclusion, advocating for the weak and the vulnerable in our society and reaching out to outcasts; remember the leper, the widow, the demon possessed, and of course, our friend, the tax collector?

So, where is the hope?

When they heard Jesus say that the Temple will be utterly destroyed, they wanted to know when it would happen and what sign there would be that it is about to happen. Then, in his response Jesus mentions all those things I just mentioned, but he also says they are not signs that the end is here or even near. So, do not be afraid.

I said that the Jerusalem Temple for the Jews was the symbol of their identity as God's people, and Jesus was telling them it would be utterly destroyed. And by the time Luke was writing the gospel, it had actually been destroyed, save for one wall. Luke wrote this apocalyptic passage 2000 years ago, but every generation, including ours, at some time in their lives experience the moment when they feel they are living the time Jesus was talking about, when it feels as though their world is falling apart. But in the text, Jesus is saying that, you see these things happen, but they are not the signs that the end time is here. Do not be terrified.

What do you think would be an equivalent for us today of what Jerusalem Temple was to the Jews in Jesus's time? What do we have that is the symbol of our identity as a people? What would shake us to the core if we thought we could lose it?

Sometime after the beginning of the pandemic, the one we're still living with, I started to hear that more and more people were experiencing anxiety. More recently, I've been hearing that the ongoing tension from the divided state of our country was making people increasingly anxious and that the mid-term election was like adding fuel to the fire of this anxiety. Our democracy is at stake, we are told. The Constitution of the United States is at risk, we hear. Who would have thought the word "insurrection" would be something we get used to hearing in the news, but that's the world we live in. I'm sorry if I made you anxious just now.

And in your individual personal world, what is your Temple, that radiant center of your life that holds your identity? Close relationships? Your career? Your family? Or the wealth you have built with much sacrifice? Imagine all these things gone. Sorry if I made you even more anxious.

But here is the good news! Jesus says "Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down," "But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls." When you read "Not a hair of your head..." you know it means the divine protection; it's an enduring expression from the Hebrew Bible.

Jesus says, even when we live in a time when what we hold most dear is under threat, in war and insurrection, pandemic and natural disasters, oppression by unjust social systems, and throw in human-caused disasters which did not yet exist in Jesus's time besides war, they are not the signs that the end time is here, but we are to endure it, and we CAN endure it, because when we find ourselves in a bind, Jesus will give us the words and a wisdom that would let us stand firm, with our hearts strong, in the midst of our anxiety-ridden, chaotic and broken world.

The words and a wisdom Jesus gives are the words and wisdom Jesus lived. The words and a wisdom Jesus gives us to testify to his good news of the kingdom are the teachings and actions Jesus showed us along his journey toward Jerusalem. The disciples of Jesus who became apostles and early church leaders would later find themselves having to make their defense, literally, before the religious and political authorities and opponents. As for us, our opportunity to testify regarding the good news of Jesus the Christ is by living according to his teachings in this world. That's how we endure this time of chaos, with hope.

In this sense, we share our call with the disciples 2000 years ago. Following Jesus still means testifying to our trust in God when the state of the world shakes us to the core. We tell the world of our enduring hope and the world will see what it means to be a believer in and a follower of Jesus.

No matter what is happening in the national and international politics, regardless of the mid-term election or which party is in control of whatever, we live in the world still full of suffering; we must be ready to move according to the wisdom of Jesus that will come to us. Our Bible, the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament are the testimonies of how God acted to save a distressed people, through the wilderness, famine, oppression and even exile.

So, where is the hope in between? Hope is the hope that God will deliver God's children from this chaos and destruction of the world, and we are called to join in this Kingdom work. How we live in the midst of the chaos and the threat of destruction becomes our witness and testimony. It's not something we can prepare in advance, but our life filled with such hope testifies. So let your life speak, of the

acts of kindness and mercy, the radical hospitality of our Lord. For those of you who are by nature not doers, what your life speaks maybe about being; being a calm, non-anxious presence in the anxious world.

According to a legend, Martin Luther, the 16th century monk who prompted the wave of church reformation, said this: “If tomorrow is the Day of Judgment, then today I want to plant an apple tree.” Think about that. It testifies to the kind of confidence, a hope, that the Day of Judgment is the day of salvation from the world of destruction and a new world opens where an apple tree can grow. A person with such confidence in God’s saving power would not just wait twirling her thumb for God to start the new world, but she plants a tree; she would continue to work in the midst of chaos, because she follows Jesus who is ushering in the new world.

Jesus’s words and wisdom will sustain us through the low points in our life, personally as well as collectively, as we navigate through this chaos of a world, following in his steps, until the end of the age. And when the end does come, it is the end of the world of chaos, destruction and suffering, when the new world opens for the eternal reign of God. Let us live each day to tell of our hope in this promise of God. Amen.