

“Good News in the Midst of Apocalypticism”

Luke 21:25–36

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November 28, 2021

This is always a strange Sunday to preach. We are right on the heels of Thanksgiving and just on the cusp of Christmas, but rather than giving us something to address the afterglow of a feast with family or the wonder of the baby Jesus, the lectionary gives us apocalypticism, cosmic signs of a cataclysmic end. It is just what we need nearly two years into a pandemic and at a time when we are enduring one high-profile, racially-charged court case after another.

This would be a good Sunday for a preacher to take off, as I have sometimes done, if it weren't for the fact that the focus of Advent is not just on the first coming of the Christ into a Bethlehem stable, but on the second coming as well, no matter how we view this reality — as a future cosmic event or an ongoing experience. Furthermore, while the images may appear to portend doom and gloom, they actually speak a word of profound hope that is much needed in this time.

So, rather than ignoring these texts that are subject to misunderstanding, I want to examine them a bit more carefully today, especially the reading from Luke wherein Jesus talks about various signs of the end, or at least some kind of end, and how we might respond.

One thing this literature in general, especially Luke's imagery, does is to acknowledge the reality of despair. It is critical for life that we are in touch with reality, and as English pastor and ethicist Sam Wells has said, only those who have at least glimpsed despair can discover hope (*Journal for Preachers*, Advent, 2021, p. 10)."

Jesus is certainly in touch with reality and he knows the kind of despair the faithful in his time experience. He will die on a cross. The Jewish faithful will continue to be oppressed until their revolt and the subsequent fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple in 70 CE. Early followers of Jesus will be persecuted by not only the Romans but

many Jewish leaders as well. Jesus does not pretend that the good news he brings will do away with suffering. In fact, the imagery he uses of signs calling people to prepare for a day of judgment and accountability assumes that the times are desperate, that suffering persists.

It is critical that the people in Jesus' time acknowledge reality and it is critical that we do as well. Genuine hope is not naïve optimism. It does not assume that everything will just be okay or that we can make it okay if only we have positive thoughts and make good choices. It is based more in our trust in God than in our self-belief and it begins with our acknowledgment of reality.

In a recent article in *Journal for Preachers*, Sam Wells describes the experience of Terry Waite, who was sent as a special envoy to Lebanon in the 1980s by the Archbishop of Canterbury Robert Runcie to secure the release of hostages but was taken prisoner in Beirut in 1987 and ended up spending four years in prison (*ibid.*, p.10). Realizing the seriousness of his situation, Waite made three resolutions which helped him survive — no regrets, no self-pity, no false sentimentality.

It was a past-present-future way of facing reality. He could not change the past, so there was no benefit in dwelling on it. He would not benefit from telling a false story about the present, making it all about him. And there was no value in trying to find refuge in a fantasy about the future. No regrets, no self-pity, no false sentimentality. He did not give up hope, but nor did he pretend that things were not as they were.

We benefit from a similar acknowledgement of reality. Pretending that COVID is not real, buying into conspiracy theories, refusing to do what we can to help ourselves and others around us does nothing but exacerbate the problem. Burying our heads in the sand about White Privilege, arguing despite all evidence to the contrary that there is no such thing as institutional racism, blaming the victims of prejudice and discrimination does not alter reality nor does it help our society get to a better place. Denying the facts about climate change, the devastating consequences already being experienced, ignoring the threat to our future will not make the problem go away.

Wishing things were different, at times pretending they are, is no solution. Even when it comes to personal issues like failing health, a

troubled relationship, or a threat to our career, facing reality is the first step toward something better.

Apocalypticism acknowledges reality, it openly faces despair, it calls things as they are, but it also envisions hope. In fact, the existence of hope is what enables us to face reality.

Jesus certainly envisions hope. This is what he is doing as he talks about signs and redemption. Changes in the sun and moon, distress among nations at the roaring of the sea and the waves — it all sounds ominous to us, but this is typical apocalyptic imagery which may or may be intended as a literal description of reality. The key point is that “redemption is drawing near,” Jesus says, hope is on the horizon, God will have the final word one way or another.

It is important to note that Jesus also says all of this will happen in his generation. There are people in every age who see signs of the end in their time, but whatever Jesus is talking about has already happened. “Truly I tell you,” he says, “This generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.” So, apparently, he is not talking about a literal end, in which case he would be wrong. He is talking about something else — the radical change that will come with the destruction of the temple or the new community that will be created after his death and resurrection. He does come to be with his people, if not in the clouds, in their daily lives. The Spirit of the Risen Christ dwells among us now.

But whatever Jesus is talking about, it is a vision of hope, a promise that God will prevail, the assurance that redemption will come one way or another. Thus, the people can face their current realities openly and honestly, knowing that suffering will not be the end. God will have the last word whether in this life or the next. That’s why hope is more about God than it is us. It’s not a matter of our making a better future with our positive thoughts and actions. It’s about God’s promise of a better future empowering us to live in the present day.

When I was a teenager, I sang in the youth choir at Broadway Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, and part of this time we had the privilege of being led by Dr. Richard Lin who was also a professor at Southern Seminary when it was still an institution of higher education.

Dr. Lin was from China, and though he had lived in this country for decades, he still only used present-tense English most of the time.

One day as he was encouraging us to sing with more passion, he repeated the opening line of an anthem we were working on, “Hope break out one morning, joy, joy, joy!” We all smiled, trying to hold back the laughter. The words were, “Hope *broke* out one morning, joy, joy, joy!” But everything was present tense for Dr. Lin.

Well, to state the obvious, his English was far better than our Chinese, and perhaps there was a hidden truth in his limited grammar. Hope is always experienced in the present, in the routine of daily life, while outcomes are yet unknown, while the pandemic still rages, while our loved one is still dying or diminishing, while wrong still seems to prevail. Even now, we experience hope because of our trust in God’s future, and that hope enables us to face our challenges.

Our loved one may or may not get well, though we hope and pray he/she does. COVID, or at least its worst effects, may or may not end this year, though we hope and pray it does. Racial division may or may not end in our lifetime, though we hope and pray it does. But, in God’s eternal realm, nothing bad lasts forever. It will end. In the reading from Jeremiah, God says, “The days are surely coming when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.” *Surely coming* is God’s promise. Knowing this makes a difference.

So, apocalypticism acknowledges reality and envisions hope, and then, it inspires faithfulness. It does not encourage passivity. This needs to be underscored and put in bold because the takeaway many seem to have is that within an apocalyptic view, there is nothing left for us to do. It is true that while the prophetic view assumes we work way toward the beloved community, with God’s help, of course, the apocalyptic view assumes that the future requires a radical intervention by God. But this does not mean there is nothing left for us to do.

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, the Apostle Paul tells believers looking to the imminent return of Jesus to increase and abound in love for one another. They are not simply to wait in idleness, they are to prepare with love. In like manner, when Jesus speaks of an end,

which may also be a beginning, he tells his followers not just to be alert to the signs but to not be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness, and the worries of this life; rather they should fill their lives with prayer and find the strength to remain faithful through every challenge they face. In the light of impending radical change in the order of things, Jesus counsels not idle waiting, but active faith.

The message for us is that the combination of a grasp of reality with hope for the future frees us to live fully in the face of all challenges. This is not to say that we can always feel optimistic about the future. We may not experience the specific outcome we desire. But the ultimate hope of eternity allows us to find something meaningful to do in the present day, trusting that it will make a difference.

The familiar passage from 1 Corinthians 15, read often at funerals, ends with this word of encouragement. “Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).” This is not an afterthought; it is the primary argument the Apostle Paul is making. Christ’s resurrection is not just a happy ending to an amazing story; it is the reason we can live with a sense of purpose. “Therefore,” he says, “Because Christ is raised and we have hope for more than this life, nothing we do is in vain.” Every simple act of kindness, like the ministry of Toy Joy; every effort to seek justice, like the support of protests; every time we try to do what is right, even if it doesn’t seem to make a difference, matters.

In the film *The Mission* Jesuit priests minister to the Guarani in Eighteenth-Century South America. They begin with basic Christian teaching and simple acts of kindness, but because the people among whom they serve are victims of slave trading and neither Spain nor Portugal nor even the Church will put a stop to this, the priests take up the Guarani’s cause. In the end, they are attacked — oppressors rarely stop oppressing easily — and they refuse to fight back. It seems tragic, their efforts fail. But do they? Is this the final word? Not in the light of eternal hope. The days are surely coming, says God in Jeremiah. Redemption is near, Jesus says. That’s all we need to know.