

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Courtney Veazey
Sunday, November 13, 2022

Luke 21:5-19

‘When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, “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.”

They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” And he said, “Beware that you are not led astray, for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them.

“When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified, for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.” Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes and in various places famines and plagues, and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

“But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance, for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and siblings, by relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.’

Holy wisdom, holy word.

Thanks be to God.

Most mornings I begin my day with three essentials – prayer, coffee, and *The New York Times*. Prayer grounds me, coffee wakes me, and the paper alerts me. As my ink-stained fingers hold my coffee mug, I breathe a sighing prayer and wonder when we will ever see Isaiah’s new heavens and new earth that God is about to create.

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A new earth where we can rejoice in the events unfolding before us...where weeping and distress is heard no more...where people live out their lifetimes and enjoy their work...where the wolf and lamb feed together and the lion eats straw like the ox. What a glorious place that shall be – and what a gloriously hopeful vision to guide us.

Jesus' words of destruction in this morning's Gospel reading drastically differ from Isaiah's words of creation. Yet, our Revised Common Lectionary – that three-year cycle of Scripture readings that carries us through the liturgical year – places these two texts alongside each other – intentionally highlighting the tension between creation and destruction, dying and rising. Jesus' words of destruction better reflect my encounter with the news than Isaiah's words of creation, and I imagine our Savior's words reflect your encounters as well.

Words of wars and insurrections. Nations rising against nations. Earthquakes, famines, and plagues. Arrests, persecutions, and betrayals. Hatred-fueled deaths. Jesus' words are strong in their truth and presentation.

As the disciples admire the temple's beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus bluntly tells them that everything they see will be thrown down. The days of destruction will come. The rupturing of all that we see and admire will happen. And – yet – do not be terrified, Jesus instructs his disciples. Do not be terrified.

It is so easy to be terrified, isn't it? It's so easy to fall into the trap of fear and anxiety and despair when things as we know them rupture. It's so easy to become weary when destruction is what we see.

The mystical novel *Tomb of Sand* tells the story of an 80-year-old woman who survived the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan. A partition that drove nation against nation – a partition that for this octogenarian involved persecution and betrayal and the threat of death. Toward the end of the novel, this woman returns to the place of her childhood destruction, seeking healing and reunion with a lost loved one. Along her journey of return, she sits in the wilderness – a desert – and begins to testify...to tell her tale.

And as she testifies, butterflies come and rest on her hands, and offer these words to her: "Look, no matter when, no matter how evil the times, never abandon the hope for goodness. Inscribe this on your wings. Imbue your wings' flight with this message."¹ No matter how evil the times, never abandon the hope for goodness.

The butterflies' words point me toward Christ – our butterfly – our Resurrection. Our Resurrection who comes and rests among us as we journey toward healing. Our Resurrection who teaches us to not be terrified of life's destructive ruptures – who teaches us to acknowledge them, be alert to them, and testify in their midst. For when all is thrown down, we receive an opportunity to testify.

¹ Geetanjali Shree, *Tomb of Sand*, 611.

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Do not be terrified, Jesus says.

Testify, Jesus says. “Make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance, for I will give you words and a wisdom...” Jesus says. Prepare the seat and center of your physical and spiritual lives to defend a hope that cannot be destroyed.

And – so – when destruction comes, and we are waiting for what God is about to create – we testify to the truth. The truth that rising cannot occur without dying...that resurrection cannot occur without death. The truth that our life of baptism is a life of death and resurrection – a death and resurrection held in Christ, our Savior who promises that not a hair of our head will perish. The truth of radical hope.

The days will come when structures and institutions end. When desolation comes near. Perhaps those days are present for you now – days of terror and stress and worry and fear. Days of grief and anger while desperately waiting for restoration and redemption. Do not be terrified. Do not allow disappointment and sadness to crowd out the truth of Christ. Acknowledge life’s ruptures and testify to a deeper, wider, more glorious vision – a vision of creating and building and planting and enjoying and blessing and feeding. A vision of renewal after destruction – a vision of redemption drawing near.

And redemption is indeed drawing near.

We stand at the edge of a new liturgical year dawning. Our current liturgical year ends next Sunday when we celebrate the Reign of Christ, the One who rules over the whole universe. Our new liturgical year begins in two weeks with the first Sunday of Advent, the season of anticipating our Savior’s birth.

But before we begin another cycle that moves us through the Story that shapes all our stories...before we celebrate Christ’s reign and anticipate Christ’s birth...we must encounter the end. We must encounter the turning point and testify to the river of true hope that runs through all our days.

Our faith ancestor, the prophet Isaiah, knows destruction and endings – knows the desperate desire for salvation. Living in a land devastated by nations rising against nations – by wars, famines, and death, the prophet sits in the wilderness – a desert – and strives to understand events through the lens of redemption.

And the prophet testifies.

Renowned professor and rabbi Abraham Heschel describes this prophet’s testimony as being “tempered with human tears, mixed with a joy that heals all scars, clearing a way for understanding the future in the spite of the present. No words have ever gone further in offering comfort when the sick world cries.”²

² Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, 186.

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Clearing a way for understanding the future despite the present.

Jesus says that by our endurance we will gain our souls.

By staying with difficult situations, setting aside our terror, and embracing the opportunity to testify, we will gain our souls.

And what shall we testify? What words shall offer comfort when our sick world cries?

Perhaps we return once again to the prophet – and allow the prophet’s words to carry us until we find our own.

“For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating,
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy
and its people as a delight.”³

In the name of Christ – our living Word, our living testimony – who speaks creation into our destruction and who breathes resurrection into our souls.

Alleluia. Amen

³ Isaiah 65:17-18