

November 13th, 2022

Luke 21:5-19 “Wars and Insurrections”

Have you ever uttered the phrase, “Oh, come on, it’s not the end of the world?” We usually reserve this for someone who is upset over something we consider trivial. We’ll often say this to people who’ve experienced disappointment. We’ll say this to our kids. “I know you’re upset that you didn’t make the basketball team, but it’s not the end of the world.” Now, for the most part, I’m not a fan of this phrase because it shames a person for having feelings that, for them, are genuine. It may not be the end of the world, but for that person in that moment, it seems that way. Yet we still use that phrase! Now ... the end of the world is a serious thing. Although after Faith and Films watched *Don’t Look Up* in a few months ago, maybe we *wouldn’t* take it very seriously even if it was inevitable. I don’t know. What I *do* know is that from the beginning of recorded history we’ve been somewhere between fascinated and obsessed with the idea of the world coming to an end. There’ve been many historical events that have been interpreted as signs that we may be living our last days on earth.

For example, Europeans in the 17th century believed the bubonic plague would lead to the end of humankind. Speaking of *Don’t Look Up*, on two occasions during the 18th century, Jacob Bernoulli, a mathematician and physicist, along with a theologian named William Whiston believed that a comet was on a collision course with earth. And then on May 20, 1773, the whole city of Paris went into a panic because they misunderstood something that astronomer Jerome Lalande said about comets in a lecture. When Haley’s comet made an appearance in the skies in 1910, another French astronomer, Camille Flammarion, predicted that the comet would “impregnate the atmosphere and possibly snuff out all life on the planet.” Not wanting to miss out on a chance to make money, some shady opportunists started selling “comet pills” that were supposed to make humans immune to the toxic gasses created by the comet.

In the early 20th century, World War One was considered the “war to end all wars” and that the use of powerful war machines and chemical weapons developed during that war would end all life on earth. A byproduct of World War One was a global pandemic that some labeled “the Spanish flu” although epidemiologists eventually discovered that patient zero was probably from Kansas. “The Kansas flu” doesn’t sound as glamorous though. Then during World War Two, scientists developed atomic weapons that would eventually lead to the United States and Russia building a nuclear arsenal that, if used all at once, had the potential of causing an extinction level event. Those are just some of the *major* events in the history of *Western Civilization*. Other wars, diseases, coups, political upheavals, famines, weather-related phenomenon, comets, and eclipses have caused many to believe that “the end is near.” I believe every generation has at least one “is this going to be the thing that takes us out” moment. And yet, here we are. I suppose what has changed is that in recent history, and I’m talking within some of our lifetimes, we actually have the tools and technology to make it happen.

In my sermon last week, I was throwing some shade at a guy who’s obsessed with the Book of Revelation. So it’s only fair that I should turn the tables and confess my own obsession with the dystopian future genre. I love it! Movies, books, video games? I’m all in. *Mad Max*, *The Book of Eli*, *Gears of War*, *The Hunger Games*, *Blade Runner*, *Watchmen* and just about anything written by Phillip K. Dick. I suppose zombie stories fit in this category too so I can add *World War Z*, *The Walking Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead*, *Left 4 Dead* and *28 Days Later* to the list. “But why Jesse? Those are all dark and scary and don’t always have a happy ending.” I know, right? There’s just something fascinating about an entire genre that ponders the question, “How would humans respond to a catastrophic event that could eliminate humanity as we know it?” Back when the *Walking Dead* was still a decent TV show, Gwen Joslyn and I concluded that the show wasn’t really about how awful zombies are, it was about how awful *humans* can be! Maybe the reason I like this genre so much has to do with my hope that humanity

can be *better*! The authors of all these apocalyptic dystopian stories use this genre as a cautionary tale to humanity. “Don’t go down this road. Don’t mess things up. But even if you do, there is hope because in the end there are heroic people who can rise above the turmoil and overcome the evil that brought us to the edge of destruction in the first place. Or zombies just eat everyone and the credits roll like in *Dawn of the Dead*. Either way it’s entertaining.

Our text this week includes some images that seem apocalyptic. It takes place right after Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time. In one week, he will be arrested by the corrupt Jewish religious leaders and crucified by the Roman government. In this passage Jesus and some of his disciples were touring Herod’s Temple, which is a pretty bold move considering he had recently caused a scene where he overturned some money changers’ tables and declared that the temple had become a “den of robbers.” Then he began teaching about how corrupt the structures of power had become especially the ones related to the temple. And what did the disciples do? Jesus turned around and caught them saying, “Oh! Look how pretty the temple is! Look at all the beautiful statues and stonework!” Blessed are the clueless for they shall be called disciples. Jesus said, “You think these stones are impressive? You wait. The day is coming when not one stone will be left standing.” The disciples said, “Wait, when is this going to happen and will there be warning signs?” This is where Jesus went all “apocalyptic dystopian future” on them. But not in the way you’d expect.

He said, “You want to know *what’s* going to happen? Fine. There will be wars, insurrections, earthquakes, famine, disease, and signs in the sky. You want to know *when*? Well first of all there’s going to be persecution. Then you’ll be handed over to synagogues, kings and governors and go to prison in my name. You’ll have a chance to testify, but to no avail. There will be discord among your families and friends. You will be hated because of my name, and some of you will even be executed.” I’m sure this came as a bit of a shock to those disciples. Jesus never said that following him was going to be easy, but my word

... this sounds so *extreme*! Sounds kind of like the end of the world!
Yes. It sure does.

The Jerusalem temple *was* destroyed. In 66 CE, the Jewish population rebelled against the Romans and four years later Emperor Titus rolled in and destroyed the temple along with much of Jerusalem itself. That happened in August of 70 CE, 4 decades after what happened with Jesus and his disciples when he made this prediction in today's scripture reading. Luke's gospel was written somewhere between 80 – 90 CE. That means the first readers of Luke's gospel were at least ten years past the destruction of the Jewish Temple, but they were still reeling from the shock of that event. What happened to them must have felt like we did after the World Trade Center was destroyed in 2001. Many of these people felt helpless, hopeless, lost and abandoned by God.

This past Tuesday was the fourth anniversary of the Camp Fire which destroyed most of the city of Paradise and many other homes in the mountain communities of Eastern Butte County. The trauma of that event is still fresh on many people's minds – especially the ones who barely escaped and who lost their homes. Although anyone who lives in West Coast mountain communities knows that the possibility of wildfires exists, it doesn't make an event like this any less traumatic. Same goes for people who live in Gulf Coast communities where hurricanes are common, or people who live in the mid-west where tornadoes come out of nowhere, or folks who live in regions that are prone to flooding and mudslides. The *possibility* for catastrophe is always there, but it's still traumatic when it *does* happen. This is true with other events that Jesus mentioned. Ask the people of Ukraine about the trauma of wars and insurrections. Shoot, ask the people of Washington DC. The possibility is always there, even if it's remote, but it's still shocking for the people on the front lines when tragedy occurs.

We're all kind of on edge these days, and for a lot of reasons. We live in an era of insecurity and unrest. Academics use the term "VUCA" to describe times in history that seem Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and

Ambiguous. Some would say that's where we are right now. But there are also those who remind us that every era of human history has experienced VUCA times. There are also those who suggest that we flip things around and face the world with Vision, Understanding, Clarity, and Agility ... a re-defined "VUCA."

Here's the point I believe Luke was trying make by including this story about Jesus' time in the temple with his disciples ... especially when he knew that his readers were living in the trauma and aftermath of the temple's destruction. I believe Luke wanted to flip things around and make it clear that the destruction of the temple was not evidence of God's rejection or disfavor. Rather, it was the fulfillment of God's plan and something that could inspire Vision, Understanding, Clarity, and Agility. Or at the very least, expectation and hope. Or to put it another way - What might bring terror can result in trust.

Jesus said these things would happen. So even though it *appears* as if God's plan and work had been undermined, it really wasn't. God is still in charge. God is faithful and so Luke's audience is encouraged to remain faithful too. Discipleship is not about avoiding this time of trial and persecution. Persecution often comes along with following Jesus. No institution - even one as grand as Herod's Temple - can protect us from this. This passage isn't about doom and gloom, it's about faith and endurance through times of struggle. Don't think that the end of the temple is a clear sign of the end of the world. Yes, the institution took a huge hit. Yes, it seems like everything is crumbling all around you, and it may even *continue* to crumble. But that's because there is still work to be done. This passage is a reminder that even though the institution appeared to be crumbling all around them, and even though there was going to be all sorts of cosmic and familial crises; faith and endurance abound! Why? Because faith and endurance are the marks of true discipleship which is needed because there is still work to be done.