

“Don’t Be Afraid”

Luke 21: 5-19

It would be so easy to simply let this text be about the “end times” and how we as people of faith are called to prepare for them or rather, how not to prepare for them. Or, if truth be told, if we really didn’t like what Jesus was saying in this text, it would also be so easy for us to shrug our shoulders and say that this is the crazy part of the Bible, the part which we really don’t hold as Truth. And then we would be free to move on to other parts of the Bible, parts which we like better than this crazy weird type of talk found in the Bible.

It really would be so easy to do all those things. However, we know that as people of faith, lesson number one is we don’t get to pick out what parts of the Bible we will follow and which parts we will not. It is either all Word of God or none of it is. So as much as we would like to move on or dismiss this text as something that doesn’t apply for us as people of God today, we simply cannot do that.

Part of us growing in faith is struggling with the text, all the texts, and finding the Word of God in it for us as God’s children. And when we do that with this particular text, we discover that it tells us about Jesus’ last public act of ministry, or at least his last public act which can be found in the Gospel of Luke.

As we may remember, at this point in the story, Jesus has already entered the gates of Jerusalem. He has already been welcomed in as one who comes in the name of the Lord by his disciples. Jesus has already spent the week preaching and teaching at the Temple and during that time, some very important moments have occurred.

Jesus has cleansed the Temple, driving out all those who were selling things there. He has encountered hostile questions from the powers that be regarding his authority. The higher ups at the Temple are wanting to know who exactly gave Jesus the right to say all that he does, especially since so much of what Jesus says contradicts the rules and regulations of the Temple institution. But this doesn't stop Jesus. Also during this time, Jesus denounces the scribes, calling them out as ones who are all fluff but no substance. Then on top of all that, Jesus has the audacity to point out the generosity of a poor widow in comparison to others, contrasting how she gives all that she has while others make a show of what little they do give.

Needless to say, tensions are running high every time Jesus enters into the Temple. All week, he has been challenging the corruption and pretenses which surround the Temple. And the Temple officials are tired of it. At the end of this particular chapter, we learn that the powers that be begin looking for ways to get rid of Jesus. All because Jesus keeps causing problems for the Temple officials, He simply won't let the status quo be.

All of this is background for the conversation which Jesus has with his disciples in our text today. One of the disciples, Luke tells us, “someone” commented on the beauty and grandeur of the Temp, marveling at all the gifts which have been dedicated to God. Jesus overhears this comment and replies that all that they see will be destroyed in the days to come and if that wasn’t bad enough, Jesus goes on to talk about wars and insurrections, ending with the statement that there will come a time when the disciples will be persecuted because of Jesus’ name.

Imagine standing there and hearing Jesus say all this. You just know that that “someone” regrets saying anything at all. Here an innocent comment about the beauty of the Temple becomes a big brew ha ha, leading Jesus to predict death and destruction for everything and everyone. This has to be a real pick me up moment for the disciples. You know they are all saying to themselves, “Now tell me again why I agreed to follow Jesus?” Where’s the glory we expected? When do we get our rewards for being Jesus’ disciples? What’s in it for us for following Jesus?

At this moment when the disciples are looking towards the future, making plans to secure their well-being, Jesus turns things around and tells them that basically everything, the Temple, their families, other institutions, everything they had trusted in the past, would betray them, would be destroyed and the disciples would be left alone, with nothing...or so they thought...

You see, we miss what Jesus is really saying in this text because we only see the bad stuff...the falling of the Temple, the betrayal of families, the persecution which awaits them. When reading this text, we focus on the “bad” stuff which will result from following Jesus when in reality what Jesus is pointing out is that as humans, too often, we put our trust in imperfect institutions, in imperfect people, in imperfect systems and we lose sight of what matters, of what is real, of what is eternal, things like the promises of God, things like the love and grace of God.

The thing we need to realize is that by the time Luke is writing all this down the Temple had already fallen. The first generation of disciples had already begun facing persecutions. The early church was already being put to the test. Their preaching and teaching about the Kingdom of God was making the powers that be uncomfortable, just like it did when Jesus spoke the same things years before.

So it's no surprise at this pivotal moment in Jesus' ministry, when Jesus is about to face trial, about to face death, Luke takes this opportunity and makes a connection between what Jesus was facing and what the disciples themselves were facing at that moment in their ministry as well. Luke offers the early church comfort. He offers strength to later generation disciples. Luke reassures them of the very promises of God which tell us no matter what, we have nothing to fear. God is there, bringing about healing and wholeness. God is there, surrounding

them with hope and grace. God is there, bringing about love and light for all of God's people.

What Luke reminds the disciples is that as followers of Jesus Christ, we have the promise that everything is going to be okay. We might not know when or how but what we do know is that love will always have the last word.

You see, God never promises bad things will never happen to us. What God does promise us is that we do not have to be afraid because we know God is there with us, guiding us and leading us, God is there, surrounding us with grace. We do not have to be afraid because we know that God will always have the last word.

Luke builds on this understanding and uses it to challenge the status quo of his time. In every age, the people of God have pointed to a different way from the larger narrative of the world. Where power and might rule, we as disciples are called to bring grace and love. Where oppression pushes others to the margin, we as followers of Jesus Christ, are called to throw the doors open wide and welcome all.

Luke knew that following this call to share the Kingdom of God with all people would not be easy. Just look at what happened to Jesus when he did so. He was betrayed. He was denied. He was hung on the cross like a common criminal. The cost of discipleship is great. Yet we know that there is so much than just the

pain and suffering. We have the promises of God to give us strength and comfort for the journey ahead. All we have to do is not lose sight of what matters most...the love and grace of God.

I'll admit this would be a great time for a sermon illustration on how we could do just that but I'm still learning this lesson myself. However, I can say that there is hope. As many of you know, I am teaching ethics at the University this semester and this past week, we were talking about environmental ethics. Now this was right up my alley, what with all our conversations surrounding the work of Green Chalice. But I'm afraid that as we were talking about the environment and what are our ethical obligations to it, all I had was bad news. I shared with them about how Venice is sinking, what will be the results of the Amazon burning. We talked about how pipelines spilled 38,000 gallons of oil recently. We watched a video about how climate change was affecting the poorest in our world. By Thursday morning, I think the students dreaded me coming.

At the end of our lecture on Thursday morning, one of the students asked me what are they supposed to do to change all this? I honestly didn't have any good answers. I think I may have said something like, "This will be the question your generation will have to find answer for."

I'll admit even I was a little depressed at this point. I starting thinking...What's the point of it all? Then, something unexpected happen. I had forgotten that I had an interview with a women that morning. She was a registered dietitian and volunteer with the Religion Member Interest Group (RMIG) of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. The RMIG offers a community for members with an interest in cross-cultural awareness and reducing health disparities, specifically as they relate to people of faith. They had just launched a newsletter, and, for their next edition, they wanted to profile congregations and religiously affiliated organizations that are doing great work in the area of sustainability and caring for the earth. Midway Christian Church came to their attention as an organization who fits that profile, particularly with our programming around food.

As we started talking about what we do as Midway Christian Church, with our monthly community dinners, our connection with the farmers market, our opportunities to go gleaning, this women shared that her organization is a multi faith organization and they realize that we have so much more in common than we have differences, that all of us are working towards the same goal...a world where everyone has enough to eat, where everyone finds peace, where everyone experiences the abundances of our world. In faith terms, we are all working together to bring about God's Kingdom here on Earth as it is in heaven. And that is what truly matters.

So when we get frustrated, overwhelmed, when we begin wondering why we do what we do as disciples, we are called to remember always that the Gospel has never been about playing it safe. It has never been about predicting the future so we would be assured of what steps to take. Rather the Gospel, the very thing which transforms us into the people God created and calls us to be, has always been about offering us reassurances to give us strength during times of adversity and hardship. It has always been about us challenging the status quo so that all may experience the love and grace of God. It has always been about knowing faith is not fearing the world. Rather it has always been about knowing that God is in the midst of it all, bringing about a way of peace, a way of joy, a way of reconciliation so that all may know the Kingdom of God here on Earth as it is in Heaven. May it be so.

Amen.