



## 'The End Is Nearish...Maybe'

Lectionary 33 – Pentecost 26  
8:15 & 11:00 am, November 13, 2016  
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[Psalm 98](#); [2 Thessalonians 3:6-13](#); [Luke 21:5-19](#)

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Once a month, Pastor Horner, Pastor Brock, and I gather together to study the scripture appointed for our weekly worship. Each of us is assigned one or more Sundays, and it's our task to research the Bible passages, consider the theme, and come back to the other pastors with our thoughts. We call it our "pericope study." *Pericope* is a Greek word referring to a passage from a sacred text (for us, that's the Bible). That's what we mean when we say *pericope* (even if Spell Check on your computer insists on correcting it to read "periscope.")

Well, I was assigned this week's *pericope*, particularly Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians and Luke 21, with the theme "The End is Nearish...Maybe." As I studied those passages, and considered the theme and context, I realized I'd be preaching on these texts the Sunday following our presidential election, and at the end of a long, bruising, divisive political campaign. Oy vey.

Of course, going into our *pericope* study three weeks ago, I didn't know the outcome of the election. But I've come to the conclusion that I would have preached this sermon regardless of outcome. For it is Holy Scripture—in the context of our present situation—that shapes the sermon. This ageless scripture about the mighty acts of God and about a people devoted to God's way **always** has something to say to us in this moment in time.

Now, not only do the pastors have *pericope* studies together, we also take turns leading devotions at our Tuesday staff meetings. It was my turn this past Tuesday morning. I read an essay entitled "A Benediction for Election Season" by Episcopalian priest Father Kenneth Tanner. And it really was a benediction, a blessing. Here is how Father Tanner began:

*"May you remember that all politics and all platforms and all legalities and all borders and all leaders are temporary. May you recall that political movements and boundaries and personalities and programs are here one day and gone the next. All of these are passing away. May you resist the temptation to place ultimate trust in any person, policy, party, movement, or nation—even a beautiful idea that is embodied by a nation—because there is no nation with an eternal foundation."* ("A Benediction for Election Season" by Kenneth Tanner, *Sojourners*)

Now, with the context of those words in our minds, let's look at Jesus' words to his disciples in Luke's Gospel. These followers of Jesus are essentially country cousins visiting the big city of Jerusalem. Most of them came from fishing villages and agricultural communities. What sights awaited them! Particularly the Temple. They usually worshiped in small synagogues; these were nothing like the Temple, rebuilt by God's people who returned from exile 500 years earlier, and more recently renovated by King Herod. It had been, in fact, an elaborate reconstruction project requiring thousands of laborers. And now the small-town disciples are standing there, gazing up at its massive limestone blocks, some weighing nearly 600 tons. This huge temple appeared solid and immovable, and the very place where the Lord God himself dwelt among his people.

So, imagine these disciples, awestruck by the beauty and magnificence before them, who then hear Jesus' prophetic words, "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." What? How can that be, Lord? When will it happen? How will we know such a time has arrived?

By the time Luke actually records this account for posterity, which was probably in the latter part of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, the Temple has already been laid waste by the Roman Empire as it sought to crush Jewish rebellion in 70 AD. So Jesus' words truly are prophetic—the Temple will be left in rubble—and Luke then tells this story of Jesus and his disciples in Jerusalem, knowing the destruction of the Temple actually happened. Luke seems to be helping early Christians to see that Jesus was not just predicting an historical event in Jerusalem, but also delivering a statement about all human achievements, endeavors, personalities, programs, and institutions. That they are...temporary. That they are not where our trust is ultimately to reside. They are not even, perhaps, where our focus ought to be.

I can just imagine how the disciples, with their attention previously riveted toward the magnificent Temple, now having their attention riveted toward Jesus and his words. And what words he utters. He moves from the destruction of the Temple before them to a series of calamities and troubling events that will befall the world as they know it, and their lives as his followers. These are the kinds of utterances by our Lord that can frighten and confuse us, lead us to wrongly assign particular situations he describes to contemporary situations we are facing, or have us frantically trying to determine a timetable for the end of the world. Oh, it is true every age has its wars, tribulations, and disasters. But Jesus does not leave his first disciples (or us) mired in this chaos. Instead, he strives to help them in the midst of uncertainty by reinforcing some great certainties. First, Jesus calls them not to give in to fear: "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified..." I suppose if I googled it, or looked it up in a concordance, I'd discover exactly how many times in Luke's gospel we read the words "Do not be afraid..." But since I didn't do that ahead of time, let's just say it occurs with great frequency. From the angels singing in the heavens on the night of Jesus' birth who tell the shepherds not to be afraid....to Jesus encouraging the disciples in their work, reminding them not to be afraid because their God who loved them had numbered every hair on their head....to this passage—we learn again and again in Luke that we are not to be afraid.

Next, and the reason God's people are not to be afraid is because God is still at work in the world. God is ever-present—not in a Temple made of stone, but in a person

named Jesus who calls his disciples to turn their attention from that Temple, and see the one who stands before them as the sign of God's presence and kingdom in their midst.

Does this mean, then, that the disciples will find the way of Jesus to be easy and uncomplicated and painless? No.

Okay, then, if the Christian life has the potential to be difficult, complicated, and even possibly painful, does this mean that the disciples should go out of their way to ignore troubling times, avoid those messy human institutions and movements like politics and government, in order to remain "above the fray" or out of the chaos? **NO.**

Let's continue listening to Father Tanner's benediction:  
*"May you ... grasp that engagement with the things of this world—not escape from its harsher, darker realities—is the sacrificial pattern of Jesus Christ. May you discover your role in the just and merciful governance of the world God made good and pursue that cosmos-converting vocation with love amid the world's brokenness and grittiness. May you see your work in the world—all of your callings and activities—as a participation in bringing the kingdom of heaven to earth. May you have strength and beauty and determination and wisdom as you love your neighbor and your enemy as Christ has loved you, seeking with all persons to bring justice, mercy, and lasting peace... May your posture toward every human leader be driven by respectful prayer, and where protest, prophecy, and nonviolent resistance are need, may you have the courage to speak, oppose, and critique—in humility and charity—their ideas and actions that oppose Christ and his kingdom."* ("A Benediction for Election Season" by Kenneth Tanner, *Sojourners*)

Why, that's basically what Jesus told his disciples and what Paul writes to the Church at Thessalonica in our readings today. Jesus says to his dearest friends that they might indeed face challenging trials as they model their lives after their Lord. But then he adds, "This will give you an opportunity to testify." Did you get that? An OPPORTUNITY. In the midst of our troubling times with its division and uncertainty, at that moment when we're most apt to hide our heads in the sand, remove ourselves from Facebook, turn off the evening news, and become islands of insularity, you and I are afforded an opportunity to bear witness to Jesus Christ through it all. We aren't to ignore or avoid or neglect this beautiful world God made, but, rather, throw ourselves into it, and embrace the opportunities that come. And Jesus indirectly addresses that ol' fear thing again, for he tells his disciples that when those opportunities present themselves, **he** will give us the words and wisdom we need that our opponents cannot withstand.

Of course, Paul puts his two cents in...and it is worth much more than two cents! At the end of our reading from 2 Thessalonians today, Paul offers words of encouragement that are practically a blessing in themselves: "Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right."

Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right. This is the very opportunity the Church of Christ has each and every day. This is our life's mission and ministry in all the places we go. We are called by our Lord to do the work of God's kingdom—to care for the poor and vulnerable, to forgive wrongs and strive for

reconciliation, to steward wisely the creation God has made, to befriend all people—our neighbors far and near, and to share the merciful love of God we ourselves have experienced. Pre- or Post-election, our mission to serve remains the same. While political parties and candidates rise and fall, our allegiance to Jesus Christ remains the same. And even though we do not have a timetable of history to know when some kind of earthly end draws near, we have been assured by our Lord that our future with him awaits.

So hear Tanner's final words of blessing and believe them with all your heart:  
*"May you perceive God's love for creation in sending Jesus to embody a New Humanity, and may you join in Christ's care for the earth and all its creatures and resources, for we await with patience not only the coming of the Son in the flesh but his perfect bride, a people who beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. May you trust that Providence is working behind the scenes of history to draw all things to a good and fitting and proper end with justice and mercy. ("A Benediction for Election Season" by Kenneth Tanner, Sojourners)*

**AMEN.**

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