

THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT

Luke 21.5-19

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Before you think that I chose this text and this sermon title as an indictment of the election of a particular candidate, let me say that, in the mystery of the universe, this text was assigned for this Sunday many years ago as part of the rotation of readings in the Lectionary – that three-year cycle of readings that gets us through about 40% of the Bible. I did not chose this text. If anything, the text chose me.

I did chose this title, “the end of the world as we know it,” but I did so a week before the election when all the polls made it look like Hillary Clinton was going to be the big winner. I chose this title because, months ago, folks kept saying how incomparable this election was. And I had the lyrics of the rock band, R.E.M., running over and over in my head. As campaigns go, we were being told, this one was the end of the political world as we have known it.

So, regardless of whoever won or lost, I knew I would be talking about Luke 21 and the end of the world as we know it.

Now the truth is, the end of the world is a common human experience. It doesn't take a natural disaster or a shocking election. Sometimes it can even be something positive – like a marriage or the birth of a child or a new job that ends one world and begins another. Of course it can also be a death, divorce, loss of a career, a move, a drastic change in health or the gradual physical decline of aging. It can be kids leaving home or coming out or retirement. It can be any life-changing experience.

And it doesn't help when some well-meaning friend says: “Well, it's not the end of the world,” because, even if it's not exactly the end of the world, it certainly is the end of the world as you have known it.

I have to say that I am always a little envious when people talk about their ongoing deep relationships that were formed with friends in college. I had really important relationships at Grand Rapids Baptist College and I lost them all when I finally told the truth about my life.

The same beloved professor that handed me the Religion and Bible Award in my senior year refused to write me a recommendation to go to seminary because I had told the truth about being gay. In that phone conversation it was made clear to me that this was the end of the world as I had known it.

And the history of that experience is part of what is going on in this text in Luke 21.

Luke 21:5-19

⁵When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, ⁶“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.” ⁷They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” ⁸And 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.

⁹“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.” ¹⁰Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; ¹¹there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. ¹²“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. ¹³This will give you an opportunity to testify. ¹⁴So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; ¹⁵for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. ¹⁶You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. ¹⁷You will be hated by all because of my name. ¹⁸But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹By your endurance you will gain your souls.

We know that, by the time these words were being passed around the early community of Jesus, the end of the world Jesus was talking about had already happened.

The readers new the history of the Roman Legion marching through the countryside, killing hundreds of thousands of people, and completely obliterating the city of Jerusalem. The whole religious, cultural, and political system that had oriented their lives had been smashed. It was the end of the world as they knew it.

And what they also knew was that this was not the first time Jerusalem had been destroyed. This was, in fact, the third time the object of their hope for the world embodied in a holy city and a divine Temple had been crushed.

If they were disoriented now – and they were – they had to remember that their ancestors had been there before and the only way to move forward was, as Jesus says, to:
not be afraid to tell the truth;
to hold on to what endures;
and to take care of their souls.

“When you hear of wars and insurrections,” Jesus says, “do not be terrified.”

It's the echo of those angels, we talked about last week, from earlier in Luke that appear to an old man and a young woman and poor shepherds and to Moses saying: "Don't be afraid; don't panic."

As I have said before, this message always seems a little late. By the time someone has to tell you not to be afraid, you already are.

But the point is not to get stuck in your fear.

Jim Segaar sent me the blog of a young writer, David Wong, who wrote on Thursday:

Don't panic. Or rather, don't keep panicking for too long ... understand that the opposite of panic is not blithe acceptance of the situation – it's clear-minded, positive, day-to-day action. Panic makes you do stupid "stuff," [he used a different word] or even worse, curl up into a ball and do nothing. Don't tell me you have reason to panic. You never have reason to panic. You have reason to act.

Action motivated by panic won't necessarily help us. Dr. King is famous for saying "hate will not drive out hate" and I think he would also agree that fear will not drive out fear. If we think it's fear that motivates people to reject the progress we have made as a nation – their fear that the world they have known is coming to an end -- it won't be adding our fear into that mix that will get us anywhere. Fear will not drive out fear.

If John is right that "perfect love casts out fear," then some of the work we have to do right now is to figure out what kind of love it takes to move beyond fear into the world we imagine.

And I realize that right now, in the face of some of those hateful things that are being said and done, speaking the truth in love may seem pretty naïve. I admit that. I find myself wanting to lash out; to be satisfied with being angry; to let my fear get the best of me.

But fear won't cast out fear.

The wisdom of two thousand years ago, at the end of the world as they knew it, was: "Don't be terrified ... family and friends may betray you; they may hand you over to authorities and arrest and even kill you ... but this will give you an opportunity to do something important for you and for them - to testify; to tell the truth you have to tell."

And then this wisdom offers something very surprising. "So make up your minds," Jesus says, "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."

This, I have to say, goes against every fiber of my being. It's like my colleagues who say: "You don't need to spend time preparing for that sermon; just wing it." When there is so much on the line and so much at stake? Wing it?

But the truth is, when the end of the world as we know it shows up, we often don't know what to say and it doesn't help to pretend that we do. Hauling out some "canned" response won't help. Those same old platitudes won't serve us. Relying on old scripts and pat answers won't get us very far.

The wisdom at the end of the world as we know it shocks us, first, into silence before we dare to speak. And before we start spouting propaganda, it might be good to wait for that wisdom that reaches down into the deep places of our hearts and pulls out of us the things we have to say regardless of the cost.

Perhaps we should listen for that wisdom that cuts away the corners of polite conversation and forces us to say, not intentionally unloving things or hurtful things, but what for us is the truth at the center of our being.

Perhaps we need to look for that wisdom that challenges us to name and to invest ourselves in what we believe truly endures.

It is “by your endurance,” Jesus says, that “you will gain your souls.”

I suspect some of you are here this morning – I’m here this morning – because I know that it will take the care of my soul to endure the end of this world as we know it.

Remember that Dr. King, in his famous “I Have a Dream” speech said that the way to meet the challenge of racism was to meet physical force with “soul force.”

By that he did not mean inaction. He meant the enduring kind of energy that is fed by the soul.

Perhaps the best we can do for our souls this morning is be some place where we are invited to imagine.

Perhaps the best we can do is to sing together the testimony of a family that lost everything – that lived at the end of the world as they knew it -- and were still able to say, “It is well; it is well with my soul.” Don’t think those were easy words. The Spafford family lost their children and their property and their faith community and somehow they endured. This is the testimony of the truth they have to tell. And the legacy of that family continues to this day in Jerusalem at a social service agency for Jewish and Muslim and Christian children.

Perhaps the best we can do is to claim with Leonard Cohen our “cold and broken hallelujahs.”

This may be the end of the world as we know it but we have been here before. And if we hope to endure, the wisdom of those who have gone before us is that it will take soul force.

On Wednesday, Eric – here in the choir – gave me a copy of a reflection he had written. I asked if I could share some of it with you this morning and he graciously said that I could.

In part, he writes:

I fear for the state of our world, but I can not give in to despair. I must not. I must fight ... and we must remain firm in who we are, and keep the Light deep within us fiercely ablaze ... [So] hold each other close in the coming days ... Love deeply, sing strongly, dance wildly and above all: do not give in to despair.

Perhaps the best thing we can do for our souls this morning is to stand if you are able; take the hand of someone near you; dance if you feel your feet moving; and sing strongly the soul music of the new world we continue to imagine – “We shall overcome.”

And today, as we sing, if you hear that voice calling you out of your despair, do not harden your hearts.

We shall overcome ...

We shall live in peace ...

We'll walk hand in hand ... We'll walk hand in hand today.

NOTES

The David Wong blog can be found at www.cracked.com/blog/dont-panic/ “Soul Force” has continued to be a central concept in civil rights work. It is also the name of an organization that works for the civil rights of LGBTQ folks. The full paragraph from “I Have a Dream” is:

Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. (1963) Anthology, *I Have a Dream* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), p.103.