

Luke 21: 5-18

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." ¹Then 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 brothers, 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.

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Fearless

More than anything else in my life, the thing that I most want to learn and live, -- deep down in my bones, in my core, is to trust God. To know that I am loved unconditionally, to believe that I'm not in the universe alone.

And I've had just enough of a glimpse of that -- a sweet, precious taste of it -- to know that when I do live in this trust, those moments of my life are radically different. To trust ever more deeply would change my life. I'd live in less fear and more love.

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Imagine, if all of us here at King's Chapel, lived with that kind of trust: if this were a place people entered, and when they left they said, "Those people really seem to trust in that God to whom they say all those prayers. They risk things for what matters in life. They love others as if that matters in life. They're wise *and* they're fearless..."

Friends, if this were the case, who would you be then? What would we do together, if we were fearless?

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In today's scripture lesson, some would say that Jesus was speaking of the end times, when the lights of the heavens will shut down and the world itself will collapse. It could be that he and his colleagues thought the apocalypse would take place soon, even right around the corner.

But if that were all Jesus was talking about – the grand apocalypse, the “eschaton,” the End Times – then we may be justified in discounting this passage entirely. We know that any prediction of the world's imminent demise made in Jesus' time was patently wrong: 2000 years later, we can scoff at it, perhaps even to use it as evidence that Jesus words – all of them – can be dismissed.

We might even take this position today, despite an uneasy rustling in the back of our minds, having just witnessed a super typhoon wipe out thousands of lives in the Philippines; despite our discomfort that the new Boston mayor must assess how he'll protect us from storm surges that would inundate the city, according to the new flood maps on the front page of yesterday's Boston Globe.

Either way – whether we think the world won't end until some distant future, or at some time nearer than we'd earlier imagined -- it is still easier to dismiss Jesus' talk of buildings falling, floods and chaos, as far-fetched, irrelevant to us. We're rather leave this passage to the fringe groups who circle the date of our global demise on their calendars.

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But what if Jesus were actually talking not about the future that may or may not arise, but about things that have already occurred in our lives, about times we *already know*, have already experienced.

I think this is not just a passage about the time when *the* world will end. It's about the times when *my* world, when *your* world ends. When the big, uncontrollable things happen: when the child we love with our whole heart moves beyond the reach of our hand or our reasoning; when we wake in the night recalling the awful pain we've inflicted, but can't undo.; when the freedom of 1000 choices we *could* have made dims alongside the reality of what is, and we wonder, How did we ever get here?

There may not be a physical earthquake, but the bedrock on which you've counted crumbles. There may be no physical famine, but nothing that fed you or sustained you survives. The exterior world may look perfectly fine, but you are drowning in a flood, barely able to keep your head above water.

Because that's what Jesus' disciples were actually facing. It wasn't the actual end of *the* world they'd face -- we know that now, with the benefit of time. Rather, what

Jesus knew his little band of beloved disciples were about to face was the end of their world, as they knew it, because he was about to die.

I don't hear Jesus uttering his words, as some have suggested, as a loud harangue, a harsh demand for allegiance, lest his followers be found wanting in chaos of the End Times and "left behind." Rather, I hear Jesus being pastoral, wanting to help his friends, as he wants to help us during our most difficult times.

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What did he say? To them and to us?

First, Jesus told them *the truth*. He didn't sugarcoat anything. He does not reassure us that nothing bad will ever happen. He does not say, If you follow me, you will prosper. Jesus does not preach the so-called "Prosperity gospel," that all of his followers will achieve worldly success.

This One says, If you follow me, you will suffer loss. If you trust in me, expect ridicule from those who find you unwise. Jesus starts by telling them the truth, and thank God for that – because how could we ever trust One who didn't?

But in so doing, he says another thing: put your trust in the things of permanence, not in the things that decay and crumble. Those beautiful stones of the grand and splendid temple -- the ones the disciples were admiring there in Jerusalem -they'd crumble and fall. We know Jesus was right: 35 years later, in about 70 AD, the great Jewish Temple was destroyed for a second time, when the Romans crushed a rebellion by the Jews, who had wanted their freedom from the foreign occupying troops. Stones from the magnificent towering temple were again toppled one on another.

Focus on the permanent things, says Jesus, not that which will be fleeting. The things you've learned, through me, will last. Hold fast to *my* truths. I am honest with you, and trustworthy.

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Second, when times of huge turmoil and difficulty come, Jesus does not say He'll rush to whisper words of consolation *to us*; instead He asks us to speak up *for Him*. When the darkest days come, Jesus says, see them as an opportunity to testify about God's love and what God has done in your life.

In the face of the terrors Jesus has described, this counsel seems ludicrous, or maybe even cruel. When you are down and out, think all you have is lost, when your deepest fear is that God has abandoned you, *then* tell the stories about God's faithfulness? Is this a silly technique to psych ourselves up, like football cheers in a stadium?

But how has your trust in God ever been built up? How have you caught sight of a God of love powerful enough to overcome even death?

For me, it has most often been in the storytelling, in the sharing with others, when I have listened or spoken about how God was present in the darkest times. That is how you will be consoled, Jesus says; that is how you will build your trust in me:

When America's slaves craft spirituals proclaiming God's presence despite their agony. When Terry Anderson, the very secular American journalist held hostage in the Middle East, stuns us by writing about God's presence with him through it all. When one of you tells me about the wrenching loss you suffered but endured, and rose again. Telling the stories, building our trust in God.

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Jesus' last suggestion in this passage is the oddest yet: don't prepare in advance. Don't think you need to do the very thing you've been taught all your life, the responsible, cautious, prudent thing. You needn't choreograph this dance, cover all your bases, hedge all your bets. You can trust in God, Jesus insists.

Don't worry in advance about what to say because God will be with you. God will put the words in your mouth. God will never leave you. God will give you everything you need at that time. It will be all right.

This seems so odd, after Jesus has acknowledged truthfully the harm does come in this life. Odd, unless others have said the same thing to you, and it's been true. Unless others who have lived those hardworking, responsible, planned lives, found that when the chips in life were down for them, when the things that can't be planned for or forecast hit them, they *could* count on God to put the words in their mouth, and courage in their heart

In my life, two people have done this for me. One was a very successful, hard-driving business man whose philanthropy I'd admired, whose dedication to the church seemed well outside the bounds of mere gratitude. I asked him why he had that commitment.

He told me, in a few short sentences, about the day his very young daughter was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis, a disease that claims many lives. He was completely out of his league, facing something he cared about more than anything else. He couldn't control the outcome. All his money and all his strong connections among the best and brightest in Boston couldn't promise the result he needed: his little girl's health.

A church friend came in the snow to his living room that day, and said words he never forgot. "I don't know anything much about this disease, and I don't know the medical prognosis. But I know that whatever happens, it will be all right.

"I don't even know what all right even means for you and your daughter. But I do know that God will be with you through it all, and it will be all right."

Whether she lives or dies, he was saying, It will be all right, in the deepest sense.

In the last conversation I had with my father nine years ago, before he died too young of cancer, he had the same message for me. On a beautiful June Sunday morning, we sat alone in the nursing home where he lay dying; the rest of the family was at church. A few days earlier he hadn't been able to talk, but with some more radiation to his brain, the tumor there had reduced just enough, that he could talk again.

I spilled out my guts to him, of all that was on my mind, all the things I wanted his wise advice on, one more time. About those dearly precious to me: my husband, my daughter, my son. About the things I was trying so hard on, at home and work. About my hopes and my fears.

To each piece, Dad listened in great love, and then responded, with differing words but always the same message: "It will be all right; God will have something to do with it."

My father had been an obsessive planner himself, a diligent worker, a person who lived by a check-list and a highly disciplined schedule each day. He was a planner par excellence.

So it was particularly powerful to me that at the end he was delivering the same message Jesus does in today's gospel: ultimately, on the biggest things that matter, in the times of greatest need, we don't need to figure it all out in advance. God will be near.

Whatever happens - in life or in death - it will be all right. In the deepest sense, not a hair on our heads will be harmed.

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Today, as we begin to consider our future together, here at King's Chapel, when we meet as a congregation after this service and think about how our small band can move forward, perhaps we're not so different from the twelve. They also wondered how they'd move forward after Jesus died. They may have felt in over their heads. They may have wondered where they'd find the needed leadership or funds, how such a small group could carry forward God's large plan.

But somehow – somehow – they were convinced they were not alone, and so they did move forward. They stayed together. They shared their meals and prayed. They talked and acted. They trusted that somehow, with one another, they could move forward in the way they felt called, to share what they'd learned with others, to welcome into their fellowship more people who also yearned for this good news: that somehow, it would be all right.

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The thing I want most in this life is to live in the kind of trust about which Jesus spoke! Together, together, I trust that we can.

Grant us courage O God, to *try* Your wise ways,
when the oceans begin to flood our lives
and the earthquakes break open our hearts,
trusting that we'll find ourselves in your everlasting arms.
So in that trust, in Your light, we will march on.

Hymn: We are Marching in the Light of God (Siyahamba)