

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday November 17, 2019 Proper 28C
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Text: Luke 21: 5-19
Theme: The Posture of Hope

“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 (Luke 21:6).” Luke records Jesus’ chilling words in response to the disciple’s wonder and admiration at the magnificent temple in Jerusalem built by Herod the Great. It was to be sure one of the great architectural wonders of the world and Jesus speaks of its ruin. A rather famous Episcopal priest once preached a sermon on this text in the National Cathedral in Washington shortly after it was completed. “In a couple of thousand years,” he asked, “when no one is around anymore to imagine what the great American empire used to be like, will radioactive bats be flying through the empty window sockets of this ruin?” There were stricken expressions on their faces, just as there must have been at Jesus’ words.

By the time Luke is writing his gospel the unthinkable had already happened. The Roman army had ground the great city of Jerusalem into the dust, weary of the messianic Jewish uprisings. So, this writing by Luke is not so much prophetic discourse for his readers as it is historic description. Jerusalem, that place where God dwells, the temple, God’s holy house, destroyed and all of Israel’s hopes and dreams with it.

As we lean into the season of Advent, we encounter these apocalyptic texts that speak of the end of time. They are texts that a full of language used in such a way that it reaches beyond our world and into the next. It is freed from its normal constraints as it attempts to describe or invoke or invite us to see the world anew through the eyes of the Kingdom of God. Apocalyptic language is language that has ventured into the realm of God’s future and returned to give us a new vision of God’s purposes for the world.

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roar of the sea and the waves. People will faint from foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near (Luke 21: 25-28).”

Apocalyptic writing emerges from major historical crisis or great suffering. And, as strange as this kind of writing may seem to us, it is almost always a dramatic **witness to the tenacity of hope among the people of God**. In effect it is saying things may look awful but remember that God reigns even when things look their worst. Amid the painful and prolonged suffering, with no relief in sight, faith turns its face toward heaven not only for a revelation or vision of God's will but also for a vision of the end of the present trials and suffering and the beginning of a new time, a new age to come. Apocalyptic writing is faith's answer to the cynic who mocks the faithful and has given up on the power of good to overcome the darkness and destructive tendencies of our world.

Luke's apocalyptic writing is no exception to the genre. Just as one is tempted to despair, we are bidden to, "stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near (Luke 21: 28)." One of the gifts of the New Testament writing is that all of our time (chronos time) must be seen and understood in the midst of God's time (Kairos time). The New Testament itself ends with the eschatological invocation, "Come Lord Jesus." Come back, come again, come and put your might into action. In fact, this apocalyptic language forms the basis for Christianity's oldest and shortest creed, "Come Lord Jesus or if you prefer "Pronto viene, Jesus Cristo as I saw scribbled on a cardboard sign leaning against a statue of La Virgen de Guadalupe recently in Old Town.

I wonder if there is anything stranger about the New Testament faith than this belief in the second coming, the Second Advent of Christ in our world? Is it a dream that you share, a vision of holiness returning in majesty to a world that seems so unholy and where holiness has shined with infrequency and even then, only amidst the lines of suffering on too many faces like yours and mine? We're unsure of this end of the world talk, afraid we might be asked to don a white gown and make our way up a tall mountain with a crazy band of fanatics to proclaim our wild certainty in the end of the world next Thursday afternoon around 2 pm.

It's not as if we don't understand apocalyptic images. I mean we've been looking wide-eyed at apocalypse for years now. In fact we've probably just seen far too much, too much blood shed, too much destruction by fantastic storms, too much genocide, too much gun violence, too much gridlock in Washington, too much nuclear brinksmanship, too many drone strikes, too many acts of terror, too many crazy rulers bombing their own people with chemical weapons, too many refugees and orphans of war on the move. Apocalyptic, we don't have any real trouble with the wars and rumors of wars and the portents in the heavens. We have seen so much killing in the African Genocides of Darfur, Rwanda, Central African Republic,

and now Yemen. The sheer devastation of weather chaos seems more and more apocalyptic with fierce hurricane seasons and now the strongest storm ever recorded Wilma not to mention the disappearing ice at the poles, rising sea levels and record temperatures and drought fueling huge fires around the globe.

And yet, even amid the predictions of pain and loss, Jesus urges us to look up and bear testimony, to witness to the world that, in spite of it all, God reigns. What are we supposed to say to the world when things we hold dear are falling apart, coming unglued, and seeming going to hell in a handbasket?

What can we say? We can say that this world, in any of its lostness and pain, is God's world. We can proclaim that this time is not our time. It is God's time and God will not be defeated by the sorry course of human history. Of course, this kind of hope is not an easy posture to cultivate. We are much more prone to cynicism. We're conditioned to think that our actions are the only ones in the world. We are the ones who must make history turn out right or it won't happen. But what if it is not all left up to us? What if behind all of our hoping all of our longing is one whose work is greater than our work?

Of course, you and I have our hopes. We keep hoping to discover a leader that we can trust, whose wisdom and tenacious hold on the common good is not bought and sold and negotiated out of existence. We hope that the worst of the killing will stop even if we know that the world's thirst for violence is hard to satisfy. We keep hoping that the random gun violence in our land will cease, that troubled people could get the help they need and that deadly force was not so readily at hand. Oh, and we have more personal hopes too, that we will by God's grace manage to win against our own laziness, our smoldering resentments, our private greed, and even our acceptable cruelties and lies that we struggle with, each of us every day. The hope that today I will be able to show compassion to my friend when they most need it. The real hope that in the midst of all the stress of daily life I will manage to be present and listening to my children. And perhaps not one of these is enough to get us out of bed in the morning but together maybe they are enough to keep us moving.

There is a Hebrew word for hope, *gāwāh*, that carries the meaning to twist or twine. It's an interesting image for hope for that is how hope is made it seems. The possibility that the good thing will happen and that the bad thing will not, a ligament or cord is made of our many strands of hope twisted together in strength. Many small hopes woven into a life-line strong enough to help pull us through each day. And that is probably the way hope is for each of us. We depend on a hundred small

and mostly reasonable hopes to get us through. We don't have many extraordinary hopes for those are difficult to hold onto and open us up to disappointment. For the most part we keep our hopes reasonable so that we aren't seen as foolish. To hope for more than is possible is a kind of madness I suppose.

I wonder if for reasonable people like us, thoughtful people, practical people, perhaps the apocalyptic hope is too much? Have we resigned ourselves to a kind of half-hopefulness? Is it too much to hold onto to a fantastic hope? "Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when you see these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near (Luke 28)." I suppose this may be one of our troubles, that we've stopped hoping fantastic hopes lest we be disappointed. We've settled for smaller saner hopes that maybe we can avoid the worst things and that some of the better things will happen for us yet. And that is a kind of hope that perhaps is strong enough to pull us through most days, lighting the way forward just enough.

But as Frederick Buechner describes it, "the empty place where the great hope used to be is mostly empty still, and the darkness hungers still for the great light that has gone out, the crazy dream of holiness coming down out of heaven like a bride adorned for us (Buechner)."

But I wonder have we really stopped hoping this crazy dream of God? Is there some part of us that still yearns toward mystery, is there something underneath our cool rationality that longs for the fulfillment of time? Perhaps these old stories of God's return are not so foreign to the language of our heart? Perhaps they call us to some measure of the fantastic ourselves. Maybe we too are called to at the very least admit to the possibility of God's dream, to the fantastic notion of Christ's return. I suppose that Yes is too much for us to say in a world bent on destruction but maybe, maybe is something we can say and maybe is the most that hope can ever say. Maybe Christ will come again, come quickly, Pronto viene, Jesus Cristo.

We Christians are certainly called to reach out to the world in love. We are to look for Christ in the face of the person in front of us, living out our baptismal covenant of respecting the dignity of every human being. But it seems to me that there is more that we are called to do. In some measure we are called to be crazy dreamers of the dream of God. Jesus himself was fantastic and even with the smell of death on him invited the thief into paradise with him.

Who knows what will happen? But as one commentator put it, "In a world without God, in a way we know. In a world without God we know at least that the thing that

will happen will be a human thing, a thing no better or worse than the most humanity can be. But in a world with God, we can never know what will happen—maybe that is the most that the second coming can mean for our time – because the thing that happens then is God’s thing, and that is to say a new and unimaginable and holy thing that humanity can guess at only in its wildest dreams. (Buechner).

Each week we gather here in church to celebrate the mystery of Christ and to be reminded of the crazy dreams of God and to learn from our ancient and times fantastic stories. I’m sure it is madness to hope God’s dream in world so full of ruin and suffering, it is madness to look beyond the history of humankind to the impossibility of God. But I believe that any life of faith worth living requires a bit of holy madness within it. In the name of Christ, I, a crazy hopeful preacher, commend and dare you to live in this crazy hope that the future belongs to God no less than the past. It is not all left up to us. We do not have it in our hands to defeat God’s good purposes in creation. Though it seems as if we are trying our worst to ruin creation and upend the balance and goodness of the earth. Our time may be one of travail, a time of unrest and painful losses but even this time is God’s time.

So tomorrow at the office, or in the classroom or as you drink coffee with friends, there is nothing wrong with being a witness. Jesus is not asking you to be some starry-eyed goofy optimist: Don’t worry be happy kind of Christian.

Jesus is asking you to hold this hope in your heart, that this world is God’s world. That God loves this world. That in Jesus Christ God has decisively entered human history and made it God’s time. This is what we are to treasure in our hearts and share with others.

There has never been a better time for the return of God’s holiness. There has never been a better time for Christian hopefulness. And maybe our crazy dreaming, our madness in hoping will give Christ the crazy golden wings to come on. Let it be our prayer, God knows we need him. Come Jesus, come quickly to save us, pronto viene, Jesus Cristo.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, help us not to fall in love with the night that covers us but through the darkness to watch for you as well as to work for you; to dream and hunger in the dark for the light of you. Help us to know that the madness of God is saner than human beings and that nothing that God has wrought in this world was ever possible.

Give us back the great hope again that the future is yours, that not even the world can hide you from us forever, that at the end the One who came will come back in power to work joy in us stronger even than death. Amen. (Buechner)

*Note: I am deeply indebted to Frederick Buechner and his sermon *The Hungering Dark* which helped me to shape this sermon in so many ways. I also wish to acknowledge my debt to the commentary on Luke by Richard Rohr and to the writing of Martin L. Smith in *Sojourners* magazine and the preaching commentary of Will Willimon on this text.*