

Year C, Proper 28c
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Luke 21:5-19

Gaining Our Lives

“Some people were talking about the temple, how it was decorated with beautiful stones and ornaments dedicated to God.” They were admiring the temple and commenting to each other — tourists probably, visitors to Jerusalem. Their spirits were calmed by the gleaming stones trimmed in gold, the carved shapes curved to please the eye while inscriptions in stone calligraphy dedicated the awesome building to the glory of God.

The temple was in place, their world under control; held together by what happened in this sacred space. The building’s seams concealed and its raw-cut beams hidden from view by ornamentation and polished stone, the temple was the cultures crowning expression; the place where it all came together. This was a world you could depend on. Here you could relax and feel safe if you were one of the chosen.

Jesus overhears them and interrupts their conversation. He tells them, “As for the things you are admiring, the time is coming when not even one stone will be left upon another. All will be demolished.” In their imaginations the building crumbles before them. He contradicts its supposed solidness and the secure world they believe it represents.

I don’t know how to put this delicately but the analogy seems obvious to me. They feel a little like many of us do with Trump’s surprise victory this week. All the things we “temple admirers” thought solid seem to be flying through the air. The decorations have fallen from the walls revealing the seams behind them. The inscriptions have fallen from the walls and their words and letters gotten jumbled as they fell. The raw pillars of power stand naked before us no longer adorned by glistening marble and crafted flowers. The world as we have known it seems to have changed. Some are celebrating, saying it had to happen while others mourn the loss. The French Ambassador to the United States says we are seeing the end of neo-liberalism and we don’t know what will emerge in its place.

His disciples, overhearing this, asked him, “Teacher, when will these things happen? What sign will show that these things are about to happen?” They want their world put back together but he frustrates their desire, stalling in his answer, opening space where maybe they will hear him.

“Watch out,” he says, “that you aren’t deceived. Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I’m the one! and ‘It’s time!’ Don’t follow them.” Who might these imposters be who come in his name? Am I one of them? I am trying to come to you in his name this morning. What am I getting wrong? Have I misled you? What am I not seeing? This is the question most of the Washington establishment and the news media are asking themselves too. What are they not seeing and why didn’t they see it?

Jesus goes on. “When you hear of wars and rebellions, don’t be alarmed.” Don’t be alarmed! What planet is Jesus coming from? I am alarmed when people march through Portland and occupy I-5 and on live TV I hear an angry SUV roar away from the crowd, his muffler echoing through the night.

“No,” Jesus says, “don’t be alarmed. These things must happen first, but the end won’t happen immediately.” Jesus seems to be saying this kind of polarization, commotion, noise and unrest is a stage that must be gone through. And it won’t be something we go through quickly either—but don’t be alarmed!

“Nations and kingdoms will fight against each other. There will be great earthquakes and wide-scale food shortages and epidemics.” So far this sounds quite normal—the horrific stuff of everyday news, the content of the great Mandela that has been going on for ten thousand years. “There will also be terrifying sights and great signs in the sky.” Did Jesus’ imagination include armed drones and a vision of a nuclear mushroom cloud? Jesus is starting to get a little too wild for me now. I want to check out of this conversation. If it wasn’t Jesus saying it through the Gospel of Luke I would dismiss it out of hand.

Having said all this, Jesus pulls us back a bit. “But before all this occurs, they will take you into custody and harass you because of your faith.” Does Jesus mean we Jesus-followers are going to be arrested and harassed? That’s a road I am not sure I want to drive on. “They will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name.”

I’m bargaining here. Maybe this isn’t about us at all. Maybe this is a flash forward to Jesus and the tumultuous days just ahead for him. Certainly he was taken into custody and harassed for his faith. He was handed over to be jailed by both the religious leader and state that first night; brought before Pilate, a king who represented Caesar, and Herod, the governor of Galilee. Maybe this is all about an event that occurred 2000 years ago. I hope so. I am not ready to be classified a felon for my faith.

I’m shaking in my boots but Jesus seems to be quite cheerful, “This will provide you with an opportunity to testify.” Testify! Testify to what? What are we testifying too? I think the gospel

is clear. We Jesus-followers are to testify to an all-loving, non-retaliatory, totally peaceful God who does not point an accusing finger at anyone. This is the face of God Jesus revealed to us on that apocalyptic day when we shouted “crucify him.”

When you find yourselves before kings and rulers with accusing fingers, and they are harassing you for speaking the truth and standing with those they want to sacrifice, “Make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance.” Why? Any words you prepare will only sound defensive, as though you were trying to justify yourselves. Instead depend on the words Jesus gives you in that moment for his words will be so full of truth and wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to counter or contradict them.

The words Jesus gives you will be filled with his spirit. They will have a different content than the words we normally speak and hear. They will be words both firm and gentle, forgiving and yet holding accountable, truthful and without deceit. They will be words that have nothing to hide or cover up. No violence lurks behind them and no stone facade covers the seams. This temple, the one that is non-sacrificial and living, the one that is Jesus our Lord will be beautiful all the way through. No veneer here. Solid all the way through to the truth of God Jesus reveals to all.

The world Jesus paints describes those days when the sacrificial mechanism humans have depended on no longer works, when the temple’s pretty façade has fallen, and the stones of the building lie about all a kilter, in those days all hell will break loose. Everybody will be against their neighbor. It will be a time when you will be betrayed by your parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends. They will execute some of you. We may be entering those days.

Because Jesus-followers won’t be pointing toward others with an accusing finger but rather pointing toward God who loves all and does not wish that any be sacrificed, they will be hated by everyone. A culture built on division and hatred will especially hate Jesus-followers because Jesus-followers give witness to the truth that all are of value and none expendable.

After all of this Jesus still leaves us a word of comfort. He assures us that “Still, not a hair on your heads will be lost.” He tells us we will make it through whole. At the deepest level we will be in one piece. And more than that, “by holding fast, you will gain your lives.” Dear friends, we are in the process of gaining our lives. Amen.