

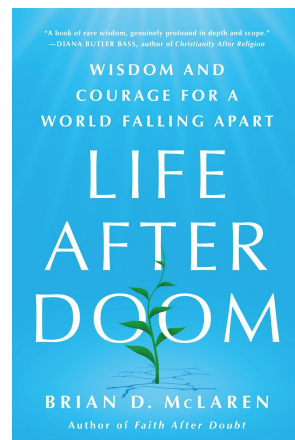
SERMON NOTES — March 23, 2025

“Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” What is Jesus doing in this morning’s Gospel Reading? He takes news of the Romans killing their fellow Galileans and turns it back on the crowd. They must all repent, or die as they did.

Once again, this does not make sense given the lens which many of were given: namely, that repentance has chiefly to do with being sorry for our sins so that Jesus can forgive us and take us to heaven when we die. No, Jesus’ call to repentance has a completely different context by which to understand it. His Jewish people had suffered for centuries under the nationalistic governance of numerous empires. The Roman were the latest. Thirty years earlier, shortly before Jesus’ birth, there had been a major armed rebellion in Galilee in which thousands of Galileans had died. Today’s reading seems to reference another such event, but a small skirmish compared to the one thirty years earlier. Thirty years later, it would all come to a head. Many of the Jews saw the only answer to Roman Nationalism as their own Jewish Nationalism. They would try all out war and fail in utter destruction. *This* is the context of Jesus’ call to repentance. If they did not repent, if they did not choose the way of Jesus *away from* nationalism, they would all die “as they did.” As the countless peoples and civilizations before them which had put their faith in nationalism.

Today, we face the same decision. But our version of nationalism includes addiction to burning fossil fuel, and to a capitalism addicted to consumerism, which is also leading to a climate crisis that is turning our earth home against us. If we don’t repent of our nationalism and choose a different path, we will die as all the nationalistic civilizations before us. The Good news is that Jesus did come to offer us that different path. He came to offer us a better way of being human which can finally liberate us from the destructive way of nationalism.

Today’s Gospel Reading basically carries the message of my friend Brian McLaren’s recent book: *Life after Doom: Wisdom and Courage for a World Falling Apart*. Different from the sermon (which ends differently), I end these notes with an extended quote from the book (excerpts from pages 108-110):



If we take off the interpretive glasses we were given by colonizers, we begin to see what the actual indigenous Bible has been saying all along: that trying to live like gods leads to doom. Living by the love of money and the love of weapons leads to doom. Living by taking more than you give leads to doom. Living without care for the Earth and the vulnerable leads to doom. Living by the ethic of dominating civilization leads to doom.

Again and again, the Bible shows itself to be the work of indigenous and oppressed people resisting exploitive civilization. When they capitulate to civilization’s values and strategies, things do not turn out well. . . .

The Bible offers little hope to the arrogant oppressors, beyond the escape clause that if they repent — if they rethink their dominating overshoot project and defect from it, if they learn to live in humble, generous harmony with one another and the Earth — they can begin again, if they do so in time. In fact, that is the best framework for understanding familiar terms like “repentance” or “salvation” or “redemption” or “being born again.” These words were not intended to evoke an individual forgiveness transaction with a free trip to heaven as a bonus; instead, they issued a call for the privileged and powerful to rethink the deep and unrecognized assumptions of their civilization. They challenged colonizers to see afresh, with new eyes, eyes that have been freed from the “civilized” distortions that trained them to see certain things, miss other things, and imagine they saw things that weren’t really there. This new vision can help repentant colonizers live with a new identity in a different story than before, so the Earth and the poor no longer groan under the marching boots of dominating civilizations. . . .

Let me state it as clearly as I can: The real horizon in biblical literature is not the end of an individual life at death. Nor is it the end of the space-time universe. It is the end of whatever shortsighted and small-hearted civilization currently dominates the world.

This indigenous library, like all indigenous wisdom, tells victims and perpetrators, colonized and colonizers, oppressed and oppressors the same message that combines doom and hope: The end of the world as you know it is near, but the end of the world as you know it is not necessarily the end of the world itself. To the elites at the top of a civilizational pyramid, the collapse of their civilization will truly feel like the end of the space-time continuum. They cannot imagine surviving apart from it. But to those of our species and other species who suffer under our civilization’s domination, our civilization’s collapse could feel like liberation. It would be, for them, not the end of the world, but their only chance for a new beginning.

In this way, a story that looks like doom can actually be a story of liberation.

We’ll go there next. [Next week: the Parable of the Prodigal Son]