

# **It's the End of the World As We Know It**

November 13, 2022

## **It's the End of the World As We Know It**

One of the occupational hazards of being a pastor is that you have A LOT of opinions when it comes to planning your own wedding. I mean, think about it – I've seen more than my fair share, so I know what works and what doesn't. Having been around so many weddings also breeds a few pet peeves. One of mine is when people tell a bride that it's "her day." If it's "hers" and not "theirs," we're already looking at a pretty skewed relationship.

So, when it came time to plan Scott's and my wedding, this pet peeve of mine about it being "our" day, not "my" day was at tension with the fact that I knew exactly what I wanted. It took a good amount of intentionality to make sure the service was a reflection of both of us. One of the things that I strove to do was to incorporate humor and laughter into the service because these things are so much a part of our relationship.

Don't get me wrong, it was a simple, traditional service for the most part, but my dad and I DID process in to a lovely piano version of "It's the End of the World As We Know It." One of the fun parts of that was that only people of our generation realized what the tune was. Everyone else just thought it was a pretty piano piece.

## **It's the End of the World As We Know It**

You don't need to know the song or the lyrics to get the gist of it – this world and the way things work are coming to an end. This song comes to mind this week as we read our Gospel passage from Luke 21, in which Jesus tells some people who are admiring the temple that the time is coming when it will be destroyed; in fact, no stone will be left on stone.

This passage, and others like it, is often cited when a certain brand of preacher is looking to blame calamities on the current ways of the world, like when Jerry Falwell blamed 9/11 on homosexuality or others blamed hurricane Katrina on the "amorality" of the people in that city. To do that completely misses Jesus' point in this passage.

Gilberto Ruiz, a theology professor whose work includes the aim of seeking to highlight historically minoritized perspectives, says of this passage, "Luke uses the destruction of this magnificent temple to make a statement on the impermanence of human achievement. In response to the people's wonder at the temple's beauty, Jesus attempts to divert the attention of his audience from their fascination with "these things that you see." He tells them their focus should be on something else. What, exactly, is not specified, but immediately before this exchange Jesus drew attention to a poor widow in the temple."

Jesus isn't making predictions in Luke 21, he's citing context. When he says that the temple will be destroyed, that there will be earthquakes and insurrections and his followers will be persecuted and estranged from their families, he's not looking into a crystal ball, he's saying the world as we know it, even the people and institutions we think are the most stable in the world, are not eternal. He is offering us this wisdom for the times when we're suffering with long-term physical or mental illness, relationships on the edge, finances on the edge, political systems that

not only don't move toward modeling the reign of God but actually are moved further away from that ideal by people who claim to follow Jesus.

The message I hear in this week's Gospel is that there are things we hold dear, that are not going to survive. Every life is going to hold significant loss, and none of us are going to be safe from it.

One of my most personal examples of this happened close to 15 years ago, when a drunk driver crossed a highway median and struck the car one of my cousins was driving with his whole family in it. My cousin was hospitalized for months, and his 11-year-old son was killed. After Joey's death, my godmother (the grandmother of the 11-year-old who was killed) asked, with all of the light gone from her eyes, "How will I get out of bed in the morning?"

That depth of human loss is the context of Luke 21, our Gospel passage this week. The only stronger message about suffering in the Gospels is the crucifixion itself – no stone will be left on stone, nothing that you prize is immune, no one, and nothing, not even the most wholesome, most stable things in life, will be safe from decay and destruction. Jesus acknowledges the hardest of truths – that nothing that we hold dear in this life is eternal.

So, what in this can be called Good News? Maybe it's that human beings tend to look at what is right in front of us, but today's Gospel invites us to look at the big picture – NOT heaven but our relationship with God. Faith is more a bear than a bull. Faith is a long-view project. A life of faith is sometimes more about the forest than the trees.

All of this reminds me of the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor and theologian who was killed in WWII for being part of the German resistance. Bonhoeffer moved to the United States in June 1939 at the invitation of Union Theological Seminary in New York. He soon regretted his decision despite strong pressures from his friends to stay in the U.S. He wrote to Reinhold Niebuhr, "I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the people of Germany."

Bonhoeffer went on:

I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people...  
Germany will have to face the terrible alternative  
of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that civilization may survive  
or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying civilization.  
I know which of these alternatives I must choose but I cannot make that choice  
from security.

Bonhoeffer returned to Germany on the last scheduled steamer to cross the Atlantic and would be executed by the Nazi's after years of active resistance to their atrocities. He knew that he would be safer in the U.S. He also knew that if he was going to live an integrated life, if he was going to hold to his true north, he had to approach the war not from a day-to-day level, not from a micro level, but from the level of character and principle. He looked at what was important to

him over the long term, rather than fixing on the short term. And he was able to do this by holding his relationship with God, and his commitment to God's ways, as central.

Bonhoeffer ends up being a foil to the people in the Gospel who are admiring the temple. All of us, even the most faithful, take the short view sometimes. All of us have some idols, have things that we have put our faith in that are not God.

In Luke 21, the people are admiring the temple, they're admiring the structure that has been built up to honor God, they're admiring the here and now, and Jesus says, "It's not going to last. You've put your faith in the wrong place." He says, "There are going to be innumerable people who come trying to give you quick fixes and easy answers. They are not my messengers."

We want the Joel Osteens, we want the prosperity Gospel. We want Purpose Driven Lives and "possibility thinking." But our God is not a fix it God. Our God is a with us God. Is Emanuel, is not a God who swoops in and makes it all better, but rather a God who gets dirty with us, gets sad with us, and holds us when there is nothing else to do.

Jesus was teaching that there are worldly structures that deceive us with false freedom. In the aftermath of my cousin's son's death, even my Aunt Mary's love of family and "right priorities" could not save her from her world shattering around her. Jesus tells us today that the only true freedom is loving God with all that we are. I'll tell you friends, that's what saved my Aunt, that's what gave Bonhoeffer's life purpose, and that is the only thing that is guaranteed to see us through. Furthermore, Jesus doesn't "tell his audience they should lay blame on a particular person or group of people, on their society, or even on their enemies, for their hardship." No. He says that persecution is "an opportunity to testify." (Ruiz)

### **Conclusion**

Friends, Jesus was speaking the hard truth in our Gospel today. Our churches are probably going to crumble. American Democracy as we know it is teetering on collapse. Our homes, our relationships, our 401k's, none of them are safe. Like the processional song at Scott's and my wedding, it's the end of the world as we know it. But, as those of you who know the song recall, while the bulk of the lyrics are all about chaos and destruction, the refrain belts out, "It's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine."

This Gospel is Good News because it reminds us that what IS eternal is the love of God in Christ Jesus. And there's a freedom in that. Because when we center ourselves in Christ's love, we become that love in this weary world. May that be both our hope and our prayer. Alleluia, and Amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels  
Union Congregational United Church of Christ  
Green Bay, Wisconsin  
**Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19**  
November 13, 2022