

Devotion: July 2, 2020

Luke 21:25-36

‘There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and 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.’

Then he told them a parable: ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

‘Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.’

Jesus is preaching some scary stuff here.

Scary to the disciples, scary now.

I know there are a lot of frightened people out there.

We’ve got a virus out of control, murder hornets in the west, locust swarms in Africa, 100 degree day in Siberia, racial unrest and whatever else you’re facing every day that keeps you awake at night

So let me point to one of our presidents when he said “We have nothing to fear, but fear itself.”. And I suspect that as current and painful that observation feels to me just now, it’s likely always been true.

Why else is the most common command and promise in Scripture, “Do not fear”? More than 120 times across the bible, some angel or priest or prophet or absolutely ordinary person says, usually on behalf of God, “*Do not fear!*”

Which is perhaps why this year these words for Jesus of promise and courage lift me up, “*Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near*” (21:28). It’s a promise that is easy to miss, because “these things” refers to all the scary signs in the earth and heavens, distress among people, the powers of the day being shaken, and the coming of the apocalyptic “son of man” in power and glory.

Frightening for a lot of people. So scary that, “*People will faint with fear and foreboding about what is coming upon the earth*” (26). And yet Jesus tells his disciples to “*stand up and raise your heads.*”

Why?

Take your pick: “*This is my body, given for you; this is my blood shed for you.*” Jesus’ promise of his continued and real presence with his disciples. “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*” Jesus’ promise of forgiveness...no matter what. “*Today you will be with me in paradise.*” Jesus’ promise of eventual and ultimate rest and comfort. “*Peace be with you.*” Jesus’ promise that his resurrection spells an end to death. “

Across the whole of the New Testament, Jesus promises not to abandon his disciples no matter what is happening in the world but to be with them, strengthen and encourage them, and equip them not merely to endure the challenges of the day but to flourish.

But, we need to remember that Jesus’ promises do not eliminate fear or hardship from the lives of his disciples – then or now – but rather create courage, the ability to be faithful, to do one’s duty, to retain vision and compassion and empathy, even while afraid.

Which means that even in the midst of bad times we are not helpless. And we take on the good work of being Jesus’ disciples in the world – the work of compassion for those who are hurting, encouragement to those who are afraid, solidarity with those who are oppressed, resistance to evil, forgiveness for those who have wronged us, and acceptance of all of God’s people – not because we believe our actions will change the world, but because we know Christ’s resurrection has already changed the world. We act, that is, in the confidence that Jesus’ promises are true.

At times, I know, our limited various actions of compassion and empathy and prayers, may not work. But in light of Jesus’ promise, we realize that there are no small gestures, only actions motivated by the love and courage of Christ. And I firmly believe that no action done in love and courage, no matter how small, is ever wasted.

We need to remember in these scary times that it is not our job to save the world, but rather, because Jesus has promised to save the world, it is our job to care for those in the little corner of the world we happen to inhabit. It is our job, that is, to offer an alternative to the fear that is infecting our world. And in offering courage and compassion as an alternative to fear, we will be obedient to Christ’s command: “*Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near*” (21:28).

Let us pray:

You, gracious God, are love itself, and perfect love casts out fear. Come to us in merciful patience, we pray, to love us from fear to trust, from anger to grace, from doubt to faith. Love us from our self-centeredness to hearts that willingly give themselves in selfless sacrifice and service. Love us out of our scarcity to hearts overflowing with generosity. Love us from brokenness to wholeness, from resentments and forgiveness withheld to forgiveness freely offered just as it has been freely offered to us. Come to us, Lord, overwhelming us with your love that we might love as you first loved us. Amen.