

Sermon on Isaiah 65:17-25, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13, and Luke 21:5-19
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
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When I was in seminary, I remember one of my mentors debunking the myth that many of the stories in the Bible could be made into children's stories. She talked about a very popular one, Noah and the flood. All those cute animals marching two by two up the plank onto the huge ark. The ark floating peacefully on the gentle waves as rain falls. Communion of all the beasts. Happy Noah family. Not so, she said. This story is about God wiping out the inhabitants of the earth. There is nothing nicey nice in it she said. I think she might have been right.

I think it was Mark Twain who said something to the effect that the Bible was entirely too brutal a book to read to children. And, if we think about it, we might come to the same conclusion. One of you has told me before that the Bible your parents read to you had a graphic picture in it of Solomon preparing to cut the baby in half to figure out who the babe's mother was. Other stories aren't really palatable for young ears either. Think about the sacrifice of Issac, the rape of Dinah, the crucifixion. Even what Jesus says sometimes is not really something I want to read to my children as a bedtime story.

Take our passage from Luke today. This is scary stuff. Nightmares are made of just such details. We would rather continue to gaze on the beautiful, gilded temple with the Pharisees and the disciples than think of the war, fighting, nation against nation, earthquakes, famine, plague that Jesus describes. Frightening.

And yet, to find these things now, all we have to do is open the newspaper. There it all is...war? For sure. Nation against nation? All over the world. Earthquakes? One just this week. Famine? People starving even in the hills that surround us. Plague? How about AIDS? It is not to come. It is now.

But, hasn't this always been the case, no matter the time? Didn't our ancestors look around and see these things happening in their day? Haven't people throughout the ages pointed to various happenings in their day and said that it must be the end times, that Jesus was surely coming back any day now, that it couldn't get any worse?

I know, sometimes lately, I have been saying these things. Even reading the news about our own small, cozy town lately is enough to raise the hairs on the back of my neck. Surely it can't get worse we say. We sit in our comfortable homes and read our papers, listen to our radios and TVs, and wonder about the state of the world.

But, as we listen to these scriptures today, I think we hear a different vision of what might be possible. And, we hear of a choice we have about the way we live our lives. We can live as the Thessalonians were apparently living. Some scholars say that the Thessalonians expected the Day of the Lord, the second coming, to be any day. Others argue that these folks believed themselves to be living already in heaven, after the Day of the Lord. Regardless of which you choose to believe, it is obvious that many in that community were sitting back, mooching off others, lying about idly, doing nothing, accomplishing nothing. Paul calls these folks busybodies, doing nothing, helping no one, not

even themselves. Is that how we shall live in our angst over today's world? After reading the headlines, will we throw up our hands and say, "Oh, well. There's nothing I can do anyway. It's too much. It's too big. God will just have to take care of it."

Or will we react a bit differently. I do think that in this Luke passage Jesus is talking about what will happen in the world. Jesus knows that horrible things will occur. They always have and they always will. More importantly though, I think Jesus is reminding us of the promise that in the midst of all these horrible things, God is with us. If you remain in me, Jesus says, "You will be persecuted. You will be hurt. People you love will turn against you. You might even lose your life. But, in all this, you will gain your soul." Now, most of us won't be persecuted to the point of death because of our faith, but people might look at us a bit askance, might shy away from us, might label us a bit strange. But, as we follow Jesus in scary times, his words here remind me of his words in Matthew, "And lo, I am with you, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

So, do we sit back and wait, idly twiddling our thumbs, wringing our hands and saying, "Oh goodness me, and woe is us"? Or do we testify to the hope we find in Jesus Christ? That's what Jesus tells us to do here. Stand firm and testify about me. Tell others of God's great love. Tell others of the new heaven and new earth that we read about in Isaiah, when the wolf will lie die with the lamb, where there is no weeping, where all shall have shelter and food. Instead of living in fear, stick together, work as one, and live in hope. Press on toward the goal. Love one another.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells a wonderful story about a woman she once knew. This woman told of a summer day in her childhood, “when she and some of her girlfriends hitched up their long skirts and climbed Mount Washington in New Hampshire. They went too far and stayed too long, she said, and before they knew it, the beautiful sunset they were watching had turned into a foggy dusk so that they could not see their hands in front of their faces.”

“No one had a flashlight—flashlights had not been invented yet—and no one knew for sure which way was down, but they agreed they would all hold hands and that they would not, under any circumstance, let go of one another.”

“So that is how they did it—one girl at the front, picking her way down the mountain one step at a time—and all the rest of them strung out behind her, holding onto each other’s wrists so that they made a living human chain. Every now and then someone would want to argue about which way to go and the others would listen, but what none of them did was let go.”

“‘Sometimes,’ her friend said, ‘all I knew or could see of the world was the hand ahead of me and the one behind. Sometimes my arms ached so badly I thought I would cry out loud, but that is how we made it at last. We found our way home by holding on to one another’” (*God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering*, 80).

Is it a terrifying place to be, groping around in the dark, with scary things occurring all around? Yes it is. We would really like a different set of predictions by Jesus. We would like for him to tell us that all will be well or at least if these awful things have to happen, we don’t have to be a part of them.

That's not what we get. Instead, in the midst of all these heart-wrenching, painful, destructive things, God is with us and is calling to us. Jesus reminds us to look through a different lens, and work for eternal hope. Work in the ordinary day into the eternal for God is in the ordinary and the eternal. Instead of sitting around counting signs, we should live into the world as disciples of Jesus Christ for that is where we can gain our souls. Be a part of the solution. Live into the hope of our Lord, Jesus Christ, for that hope was present as they talked about the temple long ago; it is present now; and it will always be present.

Maybe this is a story we can tell our children after all. And maybe it is a story that we can live with our children. Amen.