

Nov. 13 Mal 4.1-2a, Psal 98, 2 Thess 3.6-13, Luke 21.5-19 Baker MT

If you want to frighten someone away from Christianity, I would certainly think about using the text from Luke for today. It contains all the elements of fear maybe even absolute terror. It is called apocalyptic literature and one Bible scholar defines it in this way:

Apocalyptic literature uses unsettling language and imagery as a means to assure the faithful that they should keep their trust in God even when facing the most challenging of circumstances.

Whenever something unsettling happens in our world, there are always those moralists who run to scripture, claiming the world is failing apart because God is punishing someone. Perhaps they might even use this passage for their examples and we could: the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem could be the twin towers on 9/11 or the blowing up of many important historic sites in Afghanistan and the Middle East by terrorists who want to destroy our history. *“Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues”*. Well, certainly nations somewhere are always at war. In some circles there has been talk of a new Cold War with Russia. It says earthquakes and we have plenty of those, but it could say hurricanes, tsunamis as well. We have seen those happen of late. Plagues -- ebola and zika. And famines have happened in sub-Saharan Africa from a lack of rain and also global warming. *There is nothing particularly original or specific about Jesus’*

“predictions” here. Every age has its own false prophets, wars, natural catastrophes.

The place where this passage takes on importance is when we begin to fear for ourselves, our families. There is power in fear. Whenever a dictator rises to power it is because they tell the people they have the answers, they tell us the world is a terrible place. Granted there is trouble and there are problems with which we need to deal and bad things do happen to good people. But that has always been the case. Think of the 1930s and the Depression or even the time of the Civil War in this country. But there is no one who can make it all right for us except Jesus. One of my former pastors used to say he thought the devil worked so much harder on a believer when they were dying. It is then we are fearful and turning to whomever we can find to regain a measure of our strength.

All of this works its way towards the word control. When people are afraid they are easier to control and that is why apocalyptic messages are used so often to try and interpret history and for demagogues to act. The real danger is when these fakers call on the name of God and cloak themselves to look like Jesus. It is easy then for us to assume because Jesus' name is spoken this person has authority. Jesus said even the devil could speak the name of Jesus.

After Jesus has outlined all these threats to his listeners, he then begins to point out the dangers in that kind of literature. He says don't run after false

prophets, and do not be afraid. In spite of it all, God is in charge. *The passage exhorts us to be firm in our trust in God when calamity and persecution strike.*

The passage from Thessalonians seems to take up the struggle of how to live when the end seems near. First is something very practical. *Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. . .we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.* The early church lived with a sense of the apocalyptic. They believed Jesus would return in their own lifetime so many of them struggled when Jesus did not return as soon as they thought he would. Some folks said, “Why bother”. We have this communal living going on. We are taken care of so we don’t have to work. Paul now has to step in and tell those folks you don’t work you don’t eat. There is that old line that some people are so heavenly bound they are no earthly good.

Another danger in this kind of literature is that God is turned into a judgmental God, a God who lives in heaven and points his finger at us judging, judging, judging. I remember when the AIDS epidemic was catching hold in this country. The attacks on the gay community were vicious and as hundreds were dying, victims were told it was their fault. It was a punishment for their life style.

I was visiting with some who worked in hospital and they told about having to ban a woman from coming in and visiting with people. The nurses discovered she was telling patients they did not get well because they did not believe strongly enough in their prayers that God would heal them. They did not have enough faith.

What most of this really comes down to is a trust issue. Life is difficult and it is complicated and it is scary. And when we become too fixated on impermanent human institutions, this fear can show itself. After 9/11 someone said why didn't God stop this from happening? Why did not God stop the Holocaust? Why doesn't God stop all the bad things that happen to good people? Where is God? Albert Schweitzer, a great humanitarian and theologian from the 20th century said that we will come to know who Jesus truly is when we meet him in the work and the trouble of this world. Jesus' kingdom is found where people are in pain. Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor, once saw a child being hanged in the camp for stealing a piece of bread. "Where is God?" someone cried. "Right up there with the child", was the response he received.

St. Paul ends his exhortation to the Christians in Thessaloniki, *Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right*. I guess, when all is said and done, the purpose of apocalyptic writings is to remind us that regardless of the mess the world is in, God's in his heaven. It is very easy for us to get tied up in knots and spend our days in anxious living. To find peace in our souls and a resting place for our hearts Jesus calls us to come away for awhile and rest.

Several years ago I made a trip to Sweden to visit relatives. Knowing I was a pastor I think they took me to every church possible in southern Sweden. As we were walking around one beautiful cemetery I happened to see a small plaque beneath a tree and it was in English which was a surprise. But that little plaque, which I found quite by accident, has really changed the way I try to live my life. The plaque read: Father Gerard Hughes believes that when we die we will not face a reproofing God who will shake his finger at us and ask us to recount our sins. Rather, God will look at us and with a twinkle in God's eye ask us one question and one question only, "Did you enjoy my creation?" A simple question, but so hard to answer. Do you live in fear of a judging God or do you rest secure in a loving God who has given us everything?

Sure enough, while describing the terrible events, Jesus tells his listeners not to be afraid (Luke 21:9). We will misread 21:7-11 if we think Jesus is describing a specific set of calamities. The point is that when bad things happen -- and they will -- we should “not be terrified” (21:9) or follow anyone proclaiming these are signs of God’s judgment and the end (21:8). Instead, we should trust that God remains present in our lives.

Ultimately, their experience of persecution will not end in death but in a victory for their souls (Luke 21:19). Underscoring all of these statements in 21:12-19 is the importance of trusting in God even in the midst of hardship and persecution.

A close reading of Luke 21:5-19 shows that using this passage as a springboard for proclaiming God’s judgment on society would miss the point. Rather, the passage warns us about becoming too fixated on temporary human institutions, perhaps with the implication that we should attend to the poor in our communities instead (21:5-6; see also 21:1-4), and

it exhorts us to be firm in our trust in God when calamity and persecution strike (21:7-19). Despite its language and imagery of destruction, Luke 21:5-19 is ultimately a passage grounded in hope -- in the hope that God remains present in the world and in one's life even when things have gotten so bad that it feels like the world is closing in on us.

Luke 21.5-19

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" And he said, "Beware that you are

not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them. "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. "But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.

Mal 4.1-2a

See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.

Psalm 98

O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things.

His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory.

The Lord has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.

He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises.

Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody.

With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord.

Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it.

Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming to judge the earth.

He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.

2 Thess 3.6-13

Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not

because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.