

## Apocalyptic Advent: When You See These Things Happening...

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

December 4, 2022 – AM Sermon

Luke 21: 5-36

The passage I'm about to read is not a cozy Christmas passage. This is not the sort of passage you would read around the dinner table on Christmas eve before opening presents, but it's been a passage associated with this time of year for a long, long time. Preachers have gone to this text during advent for centuries. And that's because it's helped generation after generation of Christians make sense of their times. It has taught generation after generation of Christians how to live in the midst of the trouble of their times. That makes Luke 21 is an apocalyptic text in the classic sense. Remember the word apocalypse means 'revelation.' An apocalyptic Bible text is one that looks beneath the surface of events and *reveals* the deeper meaning. An apocalyptic text helps us look beneath the surface of events to see the spiritual meaning that is always there, just under the surface. Let's read as Jesus helps his disciples look beneath the surface of their times. **Read Luke 21:5-38.**

The passage starts out innocently enough. The disciples are wide-eyed tourists in Jerusalem. These boys are from Galilee, so they are impressed with the big city sights in Jerusalem. Especially the temple. At the beginning of the passage they are in the mode of modern day tourists in New York City, looking at the lights of Times Square and saying, "Wow! Jesus! Check it out!" Jesus throws cold water on their enthusiasm. "*Don't get too attached to it,*" says Jesus, "*The time will come when that temple will be knocked to the ground. Not one stone will be left on another.*"

Jesus is prophesying here. He's looking into the future to a specific event. He's prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem. About 40 years after Jesus speaks these words, in April of 70 AD, after years of tension with Jerusalem and its residents, the Romans will lay siege to the city. They will starve the people out, they will reduce the residents to a state of desperate hunger, and finally they will come in and burn the city down. Including the temple. The beautiful building that the disciples are admiring will be utterly destroyed just as Jesus predicts. In fact, if you go to Jerusalem today and look at the wailing wall, you are looking at the ruins left by the Romans.

It is hard to overestimate how traumatic this was for both Jews and Christians. Jerusalem and the temple were really important for the early church. Where was the church based at the beginning? In Jerusalem. That's where the apostle's lived. The early church worshipped in the temple courts, it's where they gathered for their fellowship meals, it's where the first synod of the church was held, it's where the important church decisions were made. When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem they destroyed the nerve center of the community. It would have been devastating.

It's worth noting that the loss of Jerusalem would have been the culmination of a series of calamitous events that had befallen the church. 65-70 AD were tough years for believers. Persecution had been increasing, and most historians agree that somewhere around 65 AD, the apostle Peter was executed by the Romans. Crucified upside down tradition tells us. A couple of years later the apostle Paul is martyred in Rome, beheaded by the Romans. So in the short span of 5 years the church lost its two most prominent leaders. Then on top of it all they lose their central city. So you can imagine people would have been confused: "*What is God doing? What are we supposed to do now? How do we live in such times?!*" For Christians living in 70 AD, it must have felt like history had gone haywire.

In this passage Jesus anticipates those feelings. He knows what's coming. He knows they will be confused and afraid. He knows that, on the surface, it would look like evil was winning and their world was coming apart. So Jesus gives them these words so that these people could look beneath the surface of things and see what's happening at a deeper level. He trains them to see apocalyptically – to look beneath the surface of things to see the deeper purposes of God. Of course he's not just training them; he's training us. He's teaching us to look beneath the surface of our calamities and see things at a deeper level.

**So, what specifically is he teaching us in this passage?** First he teaches us what not to do. Jesus warns us about two poor reactions to our times of trouble. **The first bad reaction is described in verses 8 and 9:** *“Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, “I am he,” and “the time is near.” Do not listen to them.”* **Jesus warns against too much end time speculation.** Jesus warns against putting too much significance in the events, over-reading the signs, and becoming convinced that the end is coming soon.

Jesus knows that's what people will do with the destruction of Jerusalem. They will see it as a sign that Christ's return is imminent. How does he know that? He knows that because he is Jesus and sees the future more clearly than we do. He also knows this because there was already lots of strong end time speculation in Jerusalem. Have you heard of the Qumran community? They were a groups of fervent Jewish believers who lived in the hills near the Dead Sea. It was their community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls. They were convinced that the end times were coming. They saw themselves as the children of light and the Messiah would come and he would lead them in a great final battle against the children of darkness. The children of darkness were the Romans and all the other unbelieving nations. The Messiah would come defeat the children of darkness and usher in the messianic age. Their end time vision was political – it was about the nation of Israel becoming prominent – and it was won by military force. Of course, not everyone in Jerusalem had a Qumran end time mindset, but many people did. And what do you think a cataclysmic even like the fall of Jerusalem did to the level of end time expectation? It ramped it up, of course. ‘The great final battle is here! This is it the end of the world is upon us!’ In times of chaos, people are drawn to end time prophecy, and there were plenty of people around who were saying, ‘Listen to me! Follow me I'm a prophet of the last days! I can read the code.’

Jesus says, ‘Don't listen to them.’ In verse 9 you can hear him explicitly saying that the fall of Jerusalem will not be the end. *“These things must happen [Jerusalem must fall], but the end will not come right away.”* Jesus is deliberately pushing against the Qumran mindset. The fall of the temple is not the end of the world. All sorts of other things must happen. There will be earthquakes, famines, pestilence. There will be seasons of persecution when you will be called in front of king and governors. There will be conflict in churches and between families. ‘All this and more has to happen before I draw history to a close, so don't get caught up in end time explanation.’

This also a good word for today. There is a high level of end time speculation right now. It usually comes from people who start by saying that we have never seen times as wicked and depraved as our times, so Jesus is coming. And then they confidently interpret the signs and say, “The time is near! Follow me.” Be careful with these prophets. First of all, while our times are undeniably dark and there are problems in this world that we need to stand against, it is a terrible overstatement to say that our times are worse than other times. Every century since Christ has seen grotesque immorality and war and disaster. The moral depravity and the level of persecution was much worse for the early church than it is for us today. And Jesus predicted there would be lots of trouble. “Before I draw history to a close there will be wave after wave of calamity, so don't be too quick to think that your calamity is the one to bring down the curtain.”

So that's one reaction to the fall of Jerusalem that Jesus wants us to avoid. **But Jesus also warns against the other extreme.** "As history goes on, as the centuries pass and you see wave after wave of wickedness, don't let your guard down." Verse 34 "*Be careful or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing drunkenness and the anxieties of life.*" Throughout the passage Jesus is warning us to stay on our toes, "*Be always on the watch! Stand up! Lift up your heads!*" Jesus is concerned about people being overly obsessed with end time stuff, but he's equally concerned and I would say more concerned, about the opposite problem. **He's concerned that people who have almost no expectation of him at all.** As history grinds on, as one crisis gives way to another, people lose their divine expectation. Not only do they stop expecting Jesus to return; they stop expecting him to do anything. They stop trying to look beneath the surface things. They stop relying on God's promises. Instead, they just see history in human terms. All they see is human purposes – human politics, human economics, human schemes, human hopes, human life and human death. They stop looking for signs, because nothing is significant.

That's what Jesus is really worried about. Because, when all you see is human causes and human power, two things can happen: you can become really anxious about politics. You can end up paying frenzied attention to every movement of human power because that's the only power there is. Or you can lose yourself in carousing, drunkenness or other escapist behavior. You see a lot of both those things in the modern church.

So Jesus warns us against two bad extremes. On the one hand too much concern with signs and end time stuff. On the other hand, no concern at all. Both of these are the wrong way to respond to crisis

**How would Jesus have us react to the chaos of history?** What is the spiritual posture he preaches to us in this apocalyptic sermon?

Jesus calls us to look beneath the surface and see that things that look and feel chaotic are actually in God's control. Because these things – evil as they might be, and as terrible as they might be – are completely in God's control. In fact, all these things are predicted. Verse 9, "these things must take place."

Verse 22: these things are a fulfillment of all that has been written. On the surface they look and feel like chaos, but they are all inside of God's plan, and he's working in the midst of all of it to fulfill his good purposes. Jesus doesn't tell us why chaotic things come into our life, nor does he tell us why they have to last so long, or be so painful. ...if only he did. But he makes it very clear that if you look beneath the surface, in the midst of all this trouble, God is absolutely in control.

Verse 28 is the verse where you really hear Jesus calls us to look beneath the surface:

*"When these things begin to take place, stand up, lift up your heads because you know that your redemption is drawing near."* Terrible events do not mean God is absent. He is not absent. He is near.

More often than we realize, events that to us look like disaster can be places where God is near and where God is working. Two examples: A woman is forced to have her baby in a stable because she is temporarily homeless. An innocent man cries out in pain upon a cross while people mock him. His friends have all abandoned him. What do these look like on the surface? Disasters, right? But God is in the midst of them fulfilling his purposes and pouring out grace. "*So when you see these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, for you know your redemption is drawing near.*"

Once you see beneath the surface and learn to trust in God's promises and purposes, you can a calm steady, graceful presence in this world. That's the other thing you hear Jesus calling us to. "*When you hear of wars and uprisings, do not be frightened.*" "*When you are brought before kings and governors to testify in the public square, do not worry about what you have to say. Just be a witness. My Spirit will give the words. Stand firm.*" *While everyone else is freaking out, you can be people of hope and life, and testimony and grace.*

So on this second Sunday of Advent, I proclaim to you: God is working under the surface of history fulfilling his promises. I proclaim to you: the God who came to us wrapped in bands of cloth at Bethlehem will return in glory to wipe away every tear and make all things new. I proclaim this to you and I pray that you will live every day with a deep sense of his work and presence of his eternal work just beneath the surface of your life.

**When I think of having that deep sense of God's eternal purposes always working under the surface, I want to close with a story that I told at Harve Westveld's funeral** on Tuesday, because it kept coming to mind as I worked with this text. Harve and Rosie lived in Allendale their whole life and they were close to their community and close to their family. In 1975 their family was rocked by a calamity. Rosie's mother died suddenly two days before Christmas. One night she was there, the next morning she was gone. The news hit them hard and that day they all gathered in the family kitchen to grieve this loss. They were all there except Harve. Harve was a UPS driver and it was 2 days before Christmas so he would have a late night delivering packages and there was not easy way to get ahold of him. It was 8 o'clock that night before he finally got his route done and walked in the door. His 16 year old son Tom gave him the news. "Dad, Grandma Gemmen died this morning. She's gone." Do you know what Harve's first response was? "Praise Jesus." It wasn't that he wasn't sad about losing her. It wasn't that he didn't feel the calamity of the loss, but he looked beneath the surface of things. He saw that grandma was with Jesus, and her suffering was over and she had entered into a place of joy. Over the years, the Holy Spirit had trained him in an advent way of seeing. The Spirit trained him to see God's eternity working beneath the surface of things, so when the calamity came, he stood up, he lifted his head, he gave witness, because he knew that the Lord was near.

May the Lord give us the same sight.

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