

Isaiah 65:17-25

Gospel Reading: Luke 21:5-19

word count 1,901

For Thanksgiving Sunday, the lectionary has delivered us such bounty in an abundance of apocalyptic reading—words describing fear, religious persecution and danger, as well as Isaiah’s words on the creation of a New Jerusalem. Yet, the creators of the lectionary had no way of knowing about the story of the Pilgrims, the voyage on the Mayflower, and the fabled landing at Plymouth Rock. Of course, since this is another story about fear, religious persecution, and danger at the beginnings of a New Jerusalem in Massachusetts, perhaps the scriptures fit the day after all, if not in the way we like to remember them.

The story in Luke reads like this morning’s newspaper. More car bombs in Iraq, a threat that Iran will build nuclear weapons and saber-rattling in return, continued slaughter and starvation in Darfur, fires in the southwest and drought in Atlanta.

A great temple of commerce was brought down and not a stone is left standing. There are wars and rumors of wars, nations have risen up against nations, there have been earthquakes, famines and plagues. We could read this as an affirmation of today’s apocalyptic thinking.

Luke is writing about the destruction of the temple, and has good reason to appear to be so prescient. The temple was destroyed around 66 CE, and Luke is writing at least ten years after all of this took place. The deed Jesus is warning us about has already been done, and there are scholars (particularly from the Jesus Seminar) who believe that Jesus never made these predictions. Others who *do* believe he said these things are quick to point out that the apocalypse that was spoken of was to come in *that* day and age, and was not recorded so that people in 2001, 2007, 2008, or in any future year, should be so narcissistic to believe that everything was about *them* and the present time they live in.

But say the word “apocalypse” to the average person on the street, and you will conjure up in his or her imagination just such a picture of catastrophic happenings. Many of us, who view our faith from what at least what we would call a more rational perspective, are also guilty of a belief in a kind of fatalism. As writer Daniel Wojcik noted in his book, *The End of the World as We Know It*,” you can detect the fatalism people carry around in their hearts just by listening to certain popular catch phrases. People will refer to this or that event in their lives (usually something extremely good or bad) and they’ll say things like, “It was fated that we meet this way. This was your destiny. It was just meant to be. It was in the cards.” Or, when someone dies, people may characterize this by saying, “It was just his time. All things happen for a reason when they are supposed to happen. It was her fate.” I have even found myself using a couple of these phrases when nothing else makes sense.

Of course, many people are not aware of the fatalism that colors their perceptions of the present and the future. It reminds me of the man who once declared, “I am not a fatalist! And even if I were, what could I do about it!?” Christians should be wary of fatalism, but for some Christians past and present, there has been an attempt to do an end-run on fatalism by claiming that they know already precisely what the future holds. And so they’ve turned passages like Luke 21 (and entire biblical books like Revelation) into a kind of giant secret code that, if we can just crack it, will spell out in neat and precise details the future’s exact timelines.

I think this is the wrong way to look at it. In this passage, Jesus is not interested in telling us precisely what the future holds but rather Who holds the future.

As Thanksgiving comes upon us, first in the celebration of friendship we share with University Synagogue here this Tuesday evening, and then again with family and friends on Thursday, we are reminded that so much has happened in this past year as we prepare ourselves to lift up that which we can really say we are thankful for.

If we do not believe in end-time thinking as it has been laid out for us today, then perhaps we can be reminded of the lessons that *can* be found in these scriptures; lessons that point out that all things at one time or another fall apart, or at least appear to, and we ourselves are left a little broken, while at the same time we search for the means to equip ourselves to move into healing and wholeness once again. Thank goodness for Thanksgiving.

There are times when our personal and corporate lives get jolted to the core—when the walls of our personal temples are shaken and come crashing down. Just as dramatic are the beautiful marble temples that represent the best we can be in government, business and society; those places where we have invested our confidence and trust, our sense of safety and pride—they come regularly falling down around us. Those of you who worry as I do about our place in the world today and our actions in it, know of what I am speaking.

But more personal and up close are the temples in which we ourselves reside. All of us will feel these crumble from time to time, and our world gets turned upside down. Those of you who have gone through a divorce, who have lost your job, who have health issues (either your own or a loved one's) know what I mean. Those among us who have been in a long period of bereavement due to the loss of someone dear to you know what I am saying. The world as you have known it has come to an end—everything you trusted in is no longer in place as it once was, and you may feel that the world and even God has turned against you. Yesterday, you were among friends and family living in a state of stability, and suddenly you feel as if you are out in the wilderness alone.

We spend our lives balancing metaphors, caught between the dark and light, the good and the bad, the right and the left; we listen to the stories that come from all sides, we are pulled by them and let them influence us where they may. When our own lives, the temples in which we perceive what is good and true, occasionally come crashing down...it is all the more difficult to hear the words of hope, of grace, of peace and joy and love.

Jesus talks about how not one stone will be left upon another, while at the same time in today's readings, Isaiah comforts a people who have been in exile, and who now return to their Jerusalem to rebuild it again towards a better future years after the destruction of the first temple.

From a process theology perspective, that better future will not appear as a final, static state. We must be prepared to re-interpret the Bible's apocalyptic language as metaphor for the renewal of our societies on the historical plane. The hyperbolic language of the passage in Isaiah 65 can serve as a poetic vision that reminds us of the ideals for which we hope and for which we believe God strives. The "new heavens" and "new earth" the prophet foresees signify the possibilities for human society when we open ourselves to God's transforming power.

"...No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth..."

It is the yin to the yang in today's readings, demonstrating how we hear truth spoken in so many ways every day that uplifts us or casts us down. It reminds us of how our emotions are pushed and pulled in difficult times as we search for answers to our problems and our pains

without fully trusting that it is not important *what* the future holds as much as it is *who* holds the future.

In Buddhism, there is a story told about the monk who once approached Buddha and asked several questions about the nature of life, suffering, death and afterlife.

At first, the Buddha gave him no reply. But the monk persisted. Each day he would repeat his questions and each day he would get silence for an answer, till he could take it no longer. He threatened to abandon the path to enlightenment unless these questions were answered, for to what purpose, he wanted to know, was he sacrificing everything, if he could not know what the future held?

Then Buddha, in his compassion, spoke. “You are like a man,” he said, “who was dying from a poisoned arrow. His friends and relatives send for a surgeon but when the surgeon arrives, the wounded man says: ‘I will not let the surgeon pull out this arrow until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble or a Brahmin, or a merchant or a worker...tall, short, or middle height...brown or golden-skinned...whether he lives in such a village or town or city...whether the bow that wounded me was a long bow or a cross bow...’ and so on.”

The Buddha then explains that before all the wounded man’s questions would have been answered he would have died. The Buddha’s point is that whilst we speculate on questions such as those above we are missing the main point, which is about the nature of suffering. He declares that to speculate on such questions is a distraction from what is essential to lead a holy life - it does not lead ‘to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nirvana.’

As we look at scriptures like those that were read today, scriptures concerning the end of things and the new beginning that follows that end, and then look at the world around us, with its fullness of signs and portents, it makes little sense for us to engage in debate as to whether or not the time is now, or a bit later, especially when we know in our deepest heart that for each of us personally the time is either coming or has already come, depending on our present circumstances, when our world is shaken, and our humanly constructed temples; those places where we place our sense of security, wholeness, joy and pride—have fallen, or might yet fall in time to come.

We can pluck out the poison arrow before it destroys our lives and find the new life we know is there for us, and we can show the way of life and of hope to others, so that instead of being lost they may be able to welcome what Isaiah calls “a new heaven and a new earth” with us. This idea of a “new heaven and a new earth” is what inspired the first Thanksgiving. And again at this time in our lives, there is always something to be thankful for.

Sermon Resources:

Section on fatalism: culled from article in “Center for Excellence in Preaching” on sermon illustrations for Proper 28 C

Story of the Buddha—found in Richard Fairchild’s, “When the World is Shaken,” Proper 28 C, and elaborated on in a more Buddhist interpretation of the story found at

<http://buddhism.about.com/od/keyconcepts/a/Noteach.htm>

Scripture for Thanksgiving Sunday, Year C

Isaiah 65:17-25

17 For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. **18** But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. **19** I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. **20** No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. **21** They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. **22** They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. **23** They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord and their descendants as well. **24** Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. **25** The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent? its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

Luke 21:5-19

5 When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, **6** "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." **7** They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" **8** 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. **9** "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." **10** Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; **11** there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. **12** "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. **13** This will give you an opportunity to testify. **14** So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; **15** for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. **16** You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. **17** You will be hated by all because of my name. **18** But not a hair of your head will perish. **19** By your endurance you will gain your souls.