

Scripture Readings for Sunday November 17th 2019

Isaiah 65:17-25 (NIV)

¹⁷ “See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. ¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. ¹⁹ I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. ²⁰ “Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; the one who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere child; the one who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. ²¹ They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ²² No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands. ²³ They will not labor in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them. ²⁴ Before they call, I will answer; while they are still speaking, I will hear. ²⁵ The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, and dust will be the serpent’s food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,” says the LORD.

Luke 21:5-19 (NIV)

⁵ Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, ⁶ “As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.”

⁷ “Teacher,” they asked, “when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?” ⁸ He replied: “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 follow them. ⁹ When you hear of wars and uprisings, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away.” ¹⁰ Then he said to them: “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. ¹¹ There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven. ¹² “But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. ¹³ And so you will bear testimony to me. ¹⁴ But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. ¹⁵ For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. ¹⁶ You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. ¹⁷ Everyone will hate you because of me. ¹⁸ But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹ Stand firm, and you will win life.

Sermon: Stand Firm

“The end is nigh!” But I don’t mean that today in terms of the end of the world, but the end of the Christian year. And the Lectionary uses this penultimate Sunday as an opportunity to consider the future based on words from the prophet Isaiah and a conversation of Jesus in the Temple just prior to his death. These particular words of Jesus words hold a special fascination for those in every generation who seek to interpret the “signs of the times.” In times of great danger, stress, and hardship, it is quite natural that persons and communities of faith seek God for hope and for promises of deliverance. It is not uncommon, however, for speculation concerning “end times” to be based on poor interpretations of scripture, including misusing today’s gospel reading.¹ Remember, in each generation, people always think that *their* time is close to the end of time!² Luke’s contemporaries likely faced tough times too. And so he writes to *encourage* and *inspire* them to *stand firm*, even if his choice of words seem strange or gloomy to us today!

Now I am sure that you, like me, have been amazed by the architecture and ornateness of very old churches and cathedrals in your travels. We can imagine the skills of the stonemasons, glass workers, carpenters, designers and all the others labourers in building such places for the glory of God. The Temple in Jerusalem was also known internationally for its magnificence.³ But more than that, it acted as the *focal point* for the whole Jewish faith. God’s *very* presence was meant to dwell there in the inner Holy of Holies surrounding the Ark of the Covenant. Luke tells us the disciples and pilgrims following Jesus were, understandably, in awe of the Temple construction.⁴ “Never mind all that,” said Jesus, “for the day will come when *not* one stone will be left on another; they will all be thrown down.”⁵ Such a catastrophe would have been *unthinkable* in Jesus’ day. It would be like going to Notre Dame in Paris 40 years ago and proclaiming, “One day all this will all be destroyed by fire”; no one would believe you.⁶ But its much more tragic and shocking than that, because the theological implication of the Temple’s destruction is that *God himself* has assuredly left the building; he has left *his people*. In light of that fact, what’s next for the Jewish faith? And what is the significance of this event for Christians too? Now just as *we* know Notre Dame *has* been consumed by fire, so Luke’s readers *knew* that Jerusalem and its Temple had been destroyed in 70 CE.⁷ Luke therefore is also stressing here that Jesus is a *reliable* prophet in foretelling Jerusalem’s demise and, therefore, *all* Christ’s words are to be considered trustworthy – including these words of warning and encouragement.

¹ Luke does, however, foretell the coming of the Son of Man later in Luke 21:25-36. We need to consider the *whole* chapter.

² “The last days” is, from a New Testament point of view, an era that *began* with the resurrection/ascension of Jesus.

³ Solomon’s great Temple had been rebuilt and expanded. This project started in c.19 BCE by King Herod the Great and continued throughout Christ’s lifetime until 62–64 CE.

⁴ Luke 21:5. Luke takes Mark 13:1–13 and edits and adapts it; explore the subtle differences!

⁵ Luke 21:6. See also Luke 19:41-44.

⁶ In the same way, who would have thought the New York’s Twin Towers would not grace its skyline prior to Sept. 11 2001?

⁷ Scholars suggest 85 CE (± 5-10 years) for the dating of Luke and certainly *after* Mark’s Gospel and *before* Paul’s corpus was collated. That being the case, this shapes how we see today’s reading in comparison to Mark 13, which is thought to be written *before* 70 CE. After the Temple’s destruction, people everywhere knew about its former glory, as a result of an exhibition of plundered furnishings and paintings that were paraded in wagons in a triumphal procession in Rome in 71 AD.

The people naturally asked Jesus “*When* will this be, and *what will be the sign* that this is about to take place?”⁸ Jesus doesn’t address the “*When?*” question, but he does – in a round about way - speak about the signs and he gives firm commands.

First, he says, “*Do not* be led astray!”⁹ There will be many claiming to be God’s Chosen One, the Messiah, who may well claim, “The end is nigh!”¹⁰ “*Do not* follow them!” We do well to ignore any who claim to be “God’s Chosen One”; they use such language to invoke unquestionable divine authority. In the same way, ignore those popular Christian bestsellers which proclaim, “The end times are here.”¹¹ Don’t be swayed by such sensationalism; “Don’t be gullible,” says Jesus.¹²

He gives another command. “*Do not* be afraid.”¹³ Jesus then follows this with a list of “signs,” including violent uprisings, wars, earthquakes and famines, which would naturally all give good grounds for fear.¹⁴ There was a time of famine in the reign of Claudius around 47 CE,¹⁵ and earthquakes and terror attacks were not unusual in the region.¹⁶ Jesus goes on to say that in addition to all these events, some of his followers will be betrayed, arrested, questioned, imprisoned, and forced to give an account of themselves before the religious and civic authorities.¹⁷ “*Don’t be afraid,*” says Jesus, “And don’t worry about what you should say because powerfully convincing words of wisdom will be given you in the moment.”¹⁸ Even so, Jesus warns his followers that some of them will be killed.¹⁹ “*Stand firm,*” Jesus exhorts, “and you will gain *life.*”²⁰ Our salvation lies in God’s good hands and we are assured those who die will not “perish.” It is, however, only *after* all those events will Jerusalem and its Temple will be destroyed.²¹ In Luke’s 2nd volume, the book of Acts, he reports of the arrests of Peter, John, Stephen, and Paul and how they all spoke eloquently to their accusers. I suggest Luke was implying their words in those speeches had the same divine authority as those of the Old Testament prophets because God’s Spirit gave them the words to say.²²

⁸ Luke 21:7. Luke uses “Teacher” 11 times in his gospel and each time it is said by a non-disciple.

⁹ Luke 21:8.

¹⁰ Luke 21:8. In saying “*I am* (he)” this is understood as a messianic (even divine) reference, similar to the “I AM” statements in John’s gospel; see also Matt 24:5 where the “Messiah” (“Christ” in Greek) is explicit. This is also a bold statement of Christ’s *identity* in Luke, and perhaps shocking for Jesus’ audience in the Temple.

¹¹ See [2].

¹² The tragedy of Jerusalem in 70 CE was an ending - a very significant ending - but not the end of everything.

¹³ Luke 21:9.

¹⁴ Luke 21:10-11. There is also mention of “horrific signs from heaven.” From an astrological perspective, cosmic signs (e.g., comets, eclipses) were understood as warnings. Luke’s audience would appreciate such claims in that context and Josephus reports of such signs prior to the destruction of Jerusalem.

¹⁵ See Acts 11:28. The dating varies between 44-48 CE.

¹⁶ According to Luke, an earthquake in Philippi a few years later (Acts 16:26). There was a devastating tsunami in 115 CE.

¹⁷ Luke 21:12,16.

¹⁸ Luke 21:15. Mark 13:11 says the Holy Spirit will give you the words at the time; Luke says Jesus himself will give the words!

¹⁹ Luke 21:16. See Acts 12:2 on James’ death. He also says that “not a hair will *perish*”; they will ultimately be vindicated.

²⁰ Curiously, the Greek word Luke uses for “life” is “*psyche*” (not “*zoe*”); Mark 13:13 and Matt 24:13 have: “will be *saved.*”

²¹ See Acts 21:20.

²² In Acts, Luke often introduces major speeches with the person being “full of the Holy Spirit” (e.g., Acts 4:8; 6:3,15; 7:55), Just like God gave speech to Moses before Pharaoh (Exod 4:11-12). Moreover, *Jesus* has authority to confer such speech.

The world is *still* a place of political and economic upheaval. Violence and wars seem to arrive out of nowhere. And famines, earthquakes and other natural and man-made disasters are ever with us. However sophisticated we think humanity has become over 2000 years, the world is still an unstable place. And, sadly, there are still minorities that are persecuted and even killed for their faith. We don't face such hardships here in Amherstburg, but we must pray and support those elsewhere who suffer for their faith. The kind of suffering we experience is usually economic or work-related, or through family fracture, or health concerns. These things can make us doubt our faith in God's goodness, and even in his existence. That's usually because God hasn't done exactly what we want him to do, like give us that high-paying, stress-free, and satisfying job, fix all our family relationships by changing everyone but me, and giving me a pain-free, healthy, and enduring life! The sufferings that arises out of work, relationships, and having finite bodies are an integral part of life. We have heard some of that this morning from George. Our attitude in all this is key. We can look *up* or look *down*; either focus our attention on God who is with us by his Spirit in all that we face, or we can be consumed by our problems. I hasten add that looking "up" should *not* be taken as escapist or a denial of the suffering we are experiencing, but a recognition that God *is with us* as we suffer.²³ Looking exclusively "down," however, denies God's involvement within history. Jesus, in speaking of the coming hardships for the church and the destruction of the Jerusalem, did *not* promise they would *not* suffer; in fact, he promised them they would! He said, "Stand firm and you will gain *life*." As I said earlier, our salvation lies in God's good hands and even those who die will not ultimately "perish."

Our Old Testament reading for today is an oracle of Isaiah concerning the new heavens and the new earth.²⁴ John, the writer of the book of Revelation quotes this same passage²⁵ and this was also written after the destruction of Jerusalem, indicating the early church still had confident hope in Isaiah's message being fully realised. It is a hope that also comes from looking "up" *not* to a heavenly *place*, but again to the *capabilities of our Creator God*. In the new creation, the former sufferings will be forgotten, overwhelmed by the love and presence of God. Crying will be a thing of the past, evil will be vanquished, and there will be stability and security. This vision might seem like wishful thinking to many, an escape from reality, or an exaggeration by Isaiah. Alternatively, we can see this as an affirmation that no power can ultimately thwart God from bringing his intentions for creation to completion. The former eventually leads to emptiness and despair; the latter to confident hope. What evidence, if any, do we have that God *will* realise his plans? We see it in the life of Jesus and his message of the kingdom of God. The reality that God's reign *has* at least begun is demonstrated in Christ's healings and other miracles. They are signs of God's capability to transform the world and to bring about wholeness [*shalom*]. God's recreative power is further evidenced in Christ's resurrection; but even this is only a foretaste of things to come. The advent of Jesus, then, puts Isaiah's prophecy in a new light for together

²³ I would say that "God even *suffers* with us."

²⁴ Isa 65:17-25. This incorporates the vindication of all those persecuted for obedience to God.

²⁵ Rev 21:1. Often NT writer's quote a verse and the readers understand that not as an isolated "proof text" but as reminder of a whole theme (or unit) from the OT that the reader needs to consider in the present context.

they assert God's good creation is worth saving!²⁶ Of course the world to come is beyond our imagination or comprehension, but that doesn't mean it will not be realised. Yes, we have many questions as to *how* this will come about, but Christ's life, death, and resurrection gives us *confidence* that God *is* actively at work within history.²⁷ Because of that confidence, we can "stand firm" and "not be afraid" as we follow Christ's example in addressing the very real concerns of the here and now. Like Jesus himself, Isaiah's words²⁸ are a light in our darkness, hope in our sufferings, provide direction for our faith, and enable us to live life fully.

My final point comes back to the words Jesus gives in times of trouble. Many people are accustomed to hearing testimonies that praise God for good times, good things, including healing, rescue, and salvation. It is *right* to celebrate God's goodness and give thanks for God's faithfulness. However, what kind of words will the Spirit give to those who continue to face hard times? We have heard from George this morning; here is another example.²⁹

The well-known gospel hymn, "*Precious Lord*," was written by Thomas Dorsey. He was born in 1899 in rural Georgia and he was a prolific songwriter and an excellent gospel and blues musician. As a young man he moved to Chicago found work as an itinerant piano player in churches and clubs, struggling to support his family. In August 1932, he left his pregnant wife, Nettie, in Chicago and travelled as the featured soloist a large revival meeting in St Louis. On the first night, he received a telegram saying his wife had died. He raced home to learn that his wife had given birth to a son before dying in childbirth. And the next day his son died as well. In sorrow and agony, Thomas withdrew from his family and friends, and he refused to compose or play any music for some time.³⁰ One day, while in the midst of his sad despair, he sat by his piano and a feeling of peace washed through him. He heard a melody in his head that he had heard before and he began to play it on the piano. That night he wrote the following, now famous, words: "Precious Lord take my hand, lead me on, let me stand; I am tired, I am weak, I am worn, through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light, take my hand precious Lord, lead me home."³¹ God's Spirit can give us the words for the moment, words of promise and hope, even in the middle of suffering, grief, and chaos. Amen, let us pray.

²⁶ And, consequently, the age to come will not merely be a spiritual existence.

²⁷ Our attention is again on our Creator God, who is realising his ultimate purposes for the world – a creation he thought was worth dying for.

²⁸ And those of John the Seer.

²⁹ See also Reddish, "*Does God Always Get What God Wants?*" (Cascade, 2018).

³⁰ "I felt that God had done me an injustice. I didn't want to serve Him anymore or write gospel songs. I just wanted to go back to that jazz world I once knew so well." Thomas Dorsey.

³¹ See also: <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-precious-lord-take-my-hand> .