

Luke 21:20–28

²⁰When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. ²¹Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those inside the city must leave it, and those out in the country must not enter it; ²²for these are days of vengeance, as a fulfillment of all that is written. ²³Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress on the earth and wrath against this people; ²⁴they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

²⁵There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Theological Perspective

What word does this text speak to those of us who live in the comfort of post-Constantinian, Western Christianity? Few people in American mainline churches live as if the eschaton is just around the corner. While movies are rife with images straight out of this passage—“distress on earth,” “falling by the edge of the sword,” “fainting from fear and foreboding” (vv. 23, 24, 26)—screenwriters are more likely to connect these themes to the threat of a zombie apocalypse, terrorist invasion, tidal waves, or ravages of global warming than to the coming of the Lord.

In both screen and Scripture, the metanarrative of catastrophe raises similar difficult issues. Is it the case that a cosmic war of good versus evil was long ago unleashed, and evil is rising in strength? If so, the question of God’s delayed intervention lingers. It is discouraging to imagine God’s turning away from human torment simply to wait until some inscrutable hour. Worse, is the desolation not ultimately wrought by the hand of evil, but rather set in motion by the hand of God? It is distressing to envision God’s setting the alarm on a ticking clock, ready to destroy the world, in order, in the end, to rescue it.

This passage answers neither complaint. Nevertheless, it offers an invitation. It urges those who wait to train their gaze to move back and forth

Pastoral Perspective

On April 10, 1963, the USS *Thresher*, a nuclear-powered submarine, went missing 220 miles off the coast of Massachusetts. It is reported that in the immediate aftermath of the submarine’s disappearance, the wife of the ship’s commander, a stalwart of faith and hope, was asked by a reporter if her faith in God had diminished, given the likelihood that her husband and the crew would never be found alive. With unflinching confidence she responded that, even if the worst should be true, God is still “God of the earth, the sky, and the sea.”¹

It is hard for many of us to imagine having such faith in God in the face of terrible disaster and personal tragedy, yet this is the kind of faith that Jesus evokes in the verses here. Many Christians have great difficulty with Jesus’ apocalyptic prophecies regarding impending doom and destruction, and the coming of the “Son of Man.” The graphic details of such end-time prophecy are too much for most of us; they defy our rational capacities and our tendency to think of history as moving in logical, progressive fashion. Others are terrorized by such portraits of “signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars” (v. 25) and the powers of heaven being shaken. We can be

1. Irene Harvey, “You Can Do Anything When You Know You’re Not Alone” (as told to Michael Drury), *McCall’s* (Sept. 1963), quoting the title of the hymn by Samuel Longfellow (1864).

Exegetical Perspective

These are difficult and painful verses. They speak of tragedy (the destruction of Jerusalem), they remind us of the exile of Jews from the land and the history of Christian condemnation of Jews, and they warn us of the judgment coming on those who will not repent.

The city of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman army under the command of Titus in August 70 CE, after a long siege. Luke knew of its destruction. Luke also knew the warnings of the Old Testament prophets regarding the destruction of Jerusalem, and he echoed parts of the account of Jesus' prophetic words in Mark 13. In addition, Luke may have heard reports of the brutality of the siege, such as those preserved by Josephus in *The Jewish Wars*.

Titus placed three "camps" comprising four Roman legions (60,000 Roman legionaries) around the city, just as Jesus predicted (v. 20), hemming it in on every side (19:43). On the ninth of Ab, the same day the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem more than five hundred years earlier, Titus gave the Tenth Legion the order to attack. Passover pilgrims trapped for months in the city had been reduced to starvation and plagued by disease, fanaticism, and derangement. Gangs roamed in search of food. So deranged was one mother that she roasted her own infant for food. Prisoners and defectors were crucified. Crosses filled the Mount of Olives, with men played in every

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As December 21, 2012, rolled near, predictions of the Mayan apocalypse flourished. The impending end of the Mayan calendar and the erroneous assumption that the end of the calendar meant the end of time created a flurry of activity among both those expecting the end and those laughing it off. The fact that the conclusion of the Mayan calendar was never intended to be interpreted as the end of time did not faze either group. Both the predictions and the jokes continued to spread. Some even stocked up on vodka and candles in preparation.¹

The Mayan apocalypse was just another in a long chain of doomsday predictions. Whether it is January 1, 2000, or May 23, 2011, or any one of many other purported due dates, chances are that if there is a theory, there will be followers, and those followers will always be met with skepticism and, in many cases, ridicule. They are unlikely, however, to be ignored. Even the skeptics are interested.

For better or for worse, we are a society fascinated with the end. Enter the word "apocalypse" into a search engine, and watch it spit out hundreds of responses: movies, books, religious sites, poetry, music. A new apocalyptic movie comes out nearly every year, and audiences still flock in.

1. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/12/11/russians-prepare-for-world-s-end-buy-candles-and-vodka.html>; retrieved Dec. 21, 2012.

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between the suffering of the earth and the horizon of heaven; not to ignore the suffering, but to stand up in the midst of it and to see redemption, just as real, beyond the tumult.

For early Christians, the threat that Jerusalem's "desolation has come near" (v. 20) was very real. Jerusalem knew destruction: in 701 BCE, Assyrian ruler Sennacherib besieged it; in 586 BCE, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, felled the temple, and exiled its leaders. Even after the rebuilding of the temple in 516 BCE under the Persian king Cyrus, the city had not known independence. For hundreds of years, Jewish people worshiped only with the consent of foreign rule, under Persians, Greeks, and now Romans.

How was one to live? While many faithful Jews acceded to these terms as the cost of peace, others rebelled. The historian Josephus names numerous rebels and Zealots before, during, and after the time of Jesus. Among them are Hezekiah, executed about 46 BCE; Judas of Galilee and Zaddok, who rebelled against Quirinius's census about 6 CE; Eleazar bar Dinaeus, captured about 52 CE; and the Sicarii, including Simon bar Giora and Elezor bar Simon, leaders in the raid on the fortress at Masada that led to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE.¹

Many scholars have long contended that Jesus himself was viewed by some as a Zealot, in addition to his role as teacher, healer, and prophet.² These verses are among those used to support that view. Indeed, this passage might be seen as an *inclusio* with Luke 4:14–24. At Jesus' inaugural appearance in his home synagogue, he unrolled the scroll of Isaiah and read from Isaiah 61:1–2a: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Now Jesus picks up (v. 22) where his messianic announcement left off, with the unfinished poetic parallel to "the year of the Lord's favor" found in Isaiah 61:2b: "the day of vengeance of our God." Indeed, the desolation of which Jesus speaks will have happened by the time the Gospels are written.

Was Jesus really inciting rebellion? The first generation of Christians experienced Jesus' prophecy of "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" (v. 27) as

1. Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.158ff.; 18.3ff.; 20.102, 160ff.; and *Jewish War* 1.204–5; 2.253; 4.503ff.; 5.5ff., cited in L. Michael White, *From Jesus to Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 37–39.

2. See, for example, Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Random House, 2013).

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paralyzed by the unthinkable prospects of the end of all we know and love. It is a daunting consideration.

Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno argued that the Western world has distorted the meaning of faith by aligning it with the Western philosophy of progress.² When we think of history as progress, the continuum of advancement never ceases, and this makes it difficult to come to terms with the disruptive prophecies of end times that Jesus describes here. When we couple such faith in progress with confidence in our own self-sufficiency, we are blinded to the way in which the unseen God may be at work in our midst.

Jesus speaks out of the prophetic tradition that warned Israel about the dreaded Day of the Lord (e.g., Isa. 13:9–13; Joel 2:1–2; Amos 5:18–20; Zeph. 1:14–18). Like the prophets who preceded him, Jesus also predicts the destruction of Jerusalem and declares this is but one of the many signs designed to warn believers and unbelievers before it is too late.

The core message of the prophecy is redemption (v. 28), not hellfire and brimstone. Death and destruction are the consequences of sin and spiritual blindness (19:44), but the destruction of the world is subordinate to the central theme of the Gospels: the love of God (e.g., John 3:16–17). The aim of the end-time prophecy is not to inspire terror, but to strengthen the faith of believers in God, who works in real time. The end-time prophecy appeals to our faith by opening our eyes to see God at work even in places where we might not expect to. Jesus' prophecies here are not designed to scare, coerce, or intimidate believers into spiritual submission in order to avert death and hell. One should never allow the fear of death to force one to do what love could not inspire you to believe. The end-time prophecy appeals to Christian faith in God rather than in human progress.

We need to beware of reading this text as an account that we can analyze and understand according to scientific reason. Instead, it calls us to trust that God is at work, despite all appearances to the contrary. Jesus' desire is to open each of us to the authenticity of full faith and trust in God.

The important news, often missed amid fears of apocalyptic endings, is that the end-time prophecy is not really the end. It is a transition into a new beginning in Christ Jesus. Perhaps this is why Jesus in Revelation 1:8 and 21:6, 13 refers to himself as the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

2. Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, trans. J. E. Crawford Fritch (orig. 1913; New York: Dover, 1954).

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conceivable way. Bodies putrefied. When the soldiers discovered that some of the Jerusalemites were swallowing their treasures in hope of retrieving them later, they started gutting their captives.

Titus's efforts to spare the temple had delayed the attack and cost him too many soldiers. It was a nearly impregnable fortress, and Jewish rebels defended every inch of it. In late June the Romans had taken the Fortress of Antonia that overlooked the temple. Titus ordered that the gates be set on fire, but the fire spread to the temple itself. Herod Agrippa II, Berenice, and Josephus watched with Titus as the rebels attacked soldiers who sought to stop the spreading fire. Soldiers plundered all the gold and furniture they could carry, trampling on the corpses. When they saw the fire spreading to the Holy of Holies, Titus raced into the inner sanctum to try to save it, but it was too late. Civilians and rebels massed on the steps of the altar, where the Romans slit their throats until the bodies lay in piles and blood ran out of the temple, which became a flaming mass. A layer of ash and a burnt home from this event remain in the Jewish Quarter to this day. When survivors broke out of the temple into the labyrinth of surrounding streets, six thousand women and children huddled together in expectation of a miraculous deliverance, but the legionaries sealed the streets and burned alive all who were trapped inside. They executed the surviving priests in their temple. The walls were torn down, and the great stones filled the valley between the temple and the city.

Rebels fled through tunnels and took refuge in the city and in Herod's palace, where they fought for another month. Finally, their leaders, John of Gishala and Simon ben Giora, surrendered, only to be humiliated in Titus's Triumph in Rome and then imprisoned for life. The Holy City was reduced to rubble, and the emperor Hadrian forbade Jews to enter it. Ironically, however, the destruction of Jerusalem prepared the way for it to be revered in Jewish memory and in turn to flourish under Byzantine Christian and then Muslim domination.¹

The destruction of Jerusalem was regularly interpreted as a sign of God's judgment on the Jews. Justin Martyr (Rome, 160 CE) expressed the common Christian judgment on Jews that was to prevail, with terrible consequences through the centuries, until the founding of the modern state of Israel in 1948. Justin Martyr claimed that circumcision "was given for a sign; . . . that you alone may suffer that which

1. See Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), esp. 3–13.

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Preaching on the end times has fallen out of favor in most mainline churches, though. The topic is relegated in the Revised Common Lectionary to only a few Sundays in the Christian year, and then preachers often handle it with kid gloves. It is unclear why this is so, given popular culture's fascination with the topic.

The preacher who takes on this text, then, will have ample cultural references from which to draw, and most likely will face a congregation that is vaguely uncomfortable, yet far from disinterested.

This particular passage was written shortly after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The writer and his original audience would have had cultural or personal memory of the events of that time. The language used would have evoked very powerful images and memories for them. They would have been able easily to conjure up the roaring of the sea, the rhythm of hoofbeats, the earthy smell of the armies surrounding the city, the sounds of people fleeing Jerusalem, the flash of swords, the cries of the pregnant and nursing mothers.

The point made to the original audience was clear: Jesus predicted this, it did happen, and it could happen again. Contemporary listeners might struggle to make as deep a personal connection to these particular images. An able preacher would have to draw upon some sharply sensory language to bring these historic scenes to life, taking care, however, not to leave the scenes of the past as solely a historical event. This passage's inclusion in the Bible is intentional. What is the message for today's believer?

The purpose of apocalyptic literature is to call the believer into repentance and to evoke hope in the midst of crisis. Though many contemporary listeners might not be able to imagine their own city surrounded by armies, they will most likely be able to read the signs in their own culture, the signs that call modern Christians to repentance. Many of the postapocalyptic movies take on those very sins in detail. Which conditions touch your congregation? Which sinful conditions (greed, devastating illness, environmental degradation, poverty, racism, etc.) are hard for your congregation to address? How is or might your congregation be responsive to these sins? What would repentance look like? Modern Christians sometimes ruminate on what Jesus would do in a particular circumstance. What might Jesus say upon returning as Son of Man?

Among the many Facebook memes that circulated prior to December 21, 2012, a particularly poignant one was a photo of a sign attached to a chain-link

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the promise of his imminent return (see 1 Thess. 4:13–18). The delayed Parousia yielded new beliefs, including the view of waiting as an edifying gift or period of testing (Heb. 10:23–13:6; Rev. 1:9–3:22). When times of outright persecution battered early Christians, verses like these provided a word of consolation: desolation would not be the last word.

This movement—at the heart of eschatological waiting—was made clear early in my childhood, as I learned family stories from the Armenian genocide. Author Chris Balakian recounts his own discovery in the journals of his great uncle, an Armenian bishop, and describes this very movement: “In the courtroom when asked, ‘How did you survive, Reverend?’ he said ‘Baksheesh’ (money). He was able to keep bribing and paying off officials to keep his little band of deportees alive another day.” Bishop Balakian had his eyes clearly on the immediate reality of terrifying desolation, yet he also saw beyond it, to the horizon of redemption. At one point he persuaded a group of men not to commit suicide, urging them to stay alive to witness the rebirth of Armenian freedom.

Chris Balakian remarks:

I think the vision that there could be an independent Armenia . . . was a powerful force. . . . They thought maybe there is going to be some redemption after this hard amount of bloodshed. . . . It was a compelling force and he mentions that more than once, the power of that image.³

The genocide would not be the first time the “desolation” would “come near” the earth (v. 20). Nor will it be the last. God did not provide escape from massive suffering; neither did God cause it. Instead, God provided an eschatological vision: for believers to train their gaze both on the woe before them, and on the redemption still to come. One day, the redemption will be final, when the Son of Man at last comes “with power and great glory” (v. 27).

CHRISTINE CHAKOIAN

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The one who dies yet lives. The one who invites us to take up the cross also promises abundant life. The one who predicts distress among nations and uproar in the natural order also promises that redemption is on the way. Do not fear!

It is ironic that end-time prophecy is disproportionately viewed as negative, when Jesus was proclaiming hope in a positive, redemptive dawning of a new era and new relationship with God. We analyze this prophecy and seldom internalize it and experience the awe, astonishment, and praise for the redemption that is promised. It is generally regarded as an idea or a concept rather than a transformative possibility.

Luke 21:27–28 describes a significant transformative experience: “Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” We can almost visualize the Son of Man, the Child of Humanity, along with the lifted heads of the faithful, and hear the singing of the doxology, “Lift up your heads, O gates! . . . that the King of glory may come in” (Ps. 24:7, 9). This is not a concept to be understood. It is a lifesaving event to be experienced, a blessing to be had. We have fallen in love with God and the world God loves. God’s grace is so much more than we deserve, but God loves us and Jesus Christ has redeemed us. We are transformed from looking for signs, because we have become the sign and evidence of the goodness and righteousness of God.

The wife of the captain of the USS *Thresher* surely grieved the loss of her husband. Even that death, though, did not undermine her confidence in the God who abides. So too may we approach this end time knowing that even if the worst should be true, the God of our redemption, who has come to us in Jesus Christ, is still God of the earth, the sky, and the sea.

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3. Chris Balakian, author of *Armenian Golgotha: A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide*, in an interview with Susan Mohammad, May 12, 2009, <http://www.macleans.ca/culture/books/q-and-a-peter-balakian>; accessed July 19, 2014.

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you now justly suffer; and that your land may be desolate, and your cities burned with fire; and that strangers may eat your fruit in your presence, and not one of you may go up to Jerusalem” (*Dialogue with Trypho* 16).²

Only in recent decades have Christians begun to come to terms with this bloody history and search for new ways to affirm God’s continuing covenant (Rom. 11:25–29) with the Jewish people. In that sense we are still feeling the effects of the destruction of Jerusalem so long ago. The healing of the breach between Christians and Jews that dates back to the first century will inescapably require a reinterpretation of the meaning of Jerusalem and its destruction. Like the Jewish prophets before him (e.g., Jer. 21:8–9; 44:6, 22), Jesus prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem as a sign of judgment, but this judgment was a cry of woe over his people. Jesus did not announce a permanent rejection of the Jews.

God’s redemptive work continues in every generation. Communities of faith should not be misled by false prophets or claims that the end of time is at hand (21:7–9). The coming of the end will be marked by unmistakable “signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars” (v. 25), and these will be signs not of great destruction but of “your redemption” (v. 28). So stand up, raise your heads. We have deep wounds to bind up. The city holy for the three monotheistic faiths still suffers violence that is utterly incompatible with holiness for all people of faith. The mysteries of signs and future events are ambiguous and elusive, but Jesus’ teachings of God’s ways of grace, love, forgiveness, and reconciliation are more than enough to occupy us, so that when the Son of Man does return, he will find us busy about the work of the kingdom that is beyond all earthly kings and their armies.

R. ALAN CULPEPPER

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fence with the Spanish sentence that translated reads, “I am not afraid that the world will end in 2012. I am afraid it will stay the same.”² The sign provokes the thought: What are we *not* doing? Are there sins of omission of which we ought to repent?

An additional theme present in this text is found in the lovely phrase, “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (v. 28). This line begs the hearer to pay attention, to notice, to look. It is a call to optimism in the midst of the swirl of crisis, a call to see God’s face in the thunderous storm and cacophonous controversy. What is obscuring the view of God for members of your congregation? What issues or events are turning faces toward the sidewalk, when the Son of Man may come in a cloud, with power and great glory? What might it take to turn those faces back up to the source of their redemption?

Ultimately, repentance must be seen in its framework of redemption. The Christian responds to his or her own personal sin and her or his participation in corporate sin as part of the reality of experiencing the redemption of Christ. Apocalyptic literature evokes frightening and fascinating imagery for the Christian and non-Christian alike. What the believer bears, though, is the knowledge that these end times are part of a long future, tied up inextricably with the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Martin Luther is reported to have said, “If I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I’d still plant my apple tree.”³ The task of the preacher approaching Luke 21:20–28 might be to show the congregation the way through the world falling to pieces, and to give them the shovels and seeds to plant a whole orchard.

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2. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 1:202.

2. <https://www.facebook.com/sustentator>; accessed Dec. 17, 2012.

3. <http://www.faithandleadership.com/content/eschatological-innovation>; accessed Dec. 17, 2012.

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²⁹Then he told them a parable; “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³⁴“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

³⁷Every day he was teaching in the temple, and at night he would go out and spend the night on the Mount of Olives, as it was called. ³⁸And all the people would get up early in the morning to listen to him in the temple.

Theological Perspective

This passage is part of a discourse about last things. Against the horizon of last things, this passage raises the question: How does one live faithfully in the present? The first part of the passage encourages Jesus’ followers that they will in fact know the end when it comes. The second part of the passage exhorts them to be prepared for it.

The passage begins with a parable that offers a key for interpreting the last day: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near” (vv. 29–31). Minimally, as Luke Timothy Johnson suggests, the parable functions “to remind them that the signs will be so obvious that they will be able to ‘see and know for themselves’ what is happening.”¹ If the signs are so obvious, though, why are so few able to recognize them? By what means are the disciples to “see and know for themselves”?

One way of answering this question is to focus on the nature of the signs themselves. What sorts of signs mark the end? The signs themselves as described in the preceding passage (21:25–27) are seemingly cosmic in scope and cataclysmic in effect.

1. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 330.

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This Gospel text is full of the language of signs and wonders. We read about them over and over again in the repetition of our biblical inquiries and the search for sure answers. The parables that Jesus told have consistently proven to be reliable resources for pastoral responses to difficult situations, life crises, and challenges. As Jesus demonstrated, they are narrative tools for finding meaning in the toughest of circumstances.

Jesus is warning the crowd in this passage that his time is at an end, even though his words and lessons are not quite at an end (v. 33). In the parable of the Fig Tree he asks the crowds to “see for yourselves” (v. 30) the sign that the seasons or times are changing. The admonition left to all of us in the parable remains relevant, as we are encouraged to see, watch, and pay attention for signs and changes. The parable of the Fig Tree and All the Trees is not locked away in an ancient announcement of what is to come. The changing of all the trees is a constant. The seasons change; the word does not change.

Jesus tells the people in the crowd to be on their guard (v. 34). It is a trap, he warns, to be either distracted or weighed down with drunkenness or worries. He is speaking to a people who do not have the conveniences of the constant distraction of a technological age. We have news, weather, economic

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This passage concludes Luke's version of the "Synoptic apocalypse" (21:5–36; Matt. 24:4–36; Mark 13:5–37) and of Jesus' public ministry. In each Synoptic Gospel Jesus responds to his disciples' requests for signs that the end time is near by foretelling various events. In the first part of Luke's apocalypse, Jesus describes vividly political and physical events: the fall of Jerusalem and the devastation of its inhabitants (21:9–10, 20–24) and the incarceration, betrayal, and persecution that will befall the disciples (21:12–19). Jesus then describes cosmic events, abstracted from the people he addresses and the place where they stand: nebulous signs in the sun, moon, and stars; a vague sense of fear on earth that results from confusing events at sea; and the Son of Man coming in the clouds (21:25–28). For most scholars, this shift from identifiable events and experiences to indeterminate occurrences in sea, earth, and sky implies a shift from the church's experience up to Luke's own time to a future time when the kingdom of God will arrive in fullness. Jesus then offers the parable of the Fig Tree.

Jesus' parable of the Fig Tree is antiapocalyptic; it discourages the disciples from looking for signs that God's reign is at hand. "Apocalypse" literally means "unveiling," and apocalypses usually lift a veil to reveal otherwise-hidden mysteries. However, this apocalypse's parable surprisingly suggests that

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"Then he told them a parable." The parable in Luke 21:29–38 is a summary of what has been said earlier in the chapter. Jesus has described the kinds of things that will take place before the end time: nation against nation, earthquakes, famines and plagues, persecution and armies surrounding Jerusalem. He has described the nature of the end time, the destruction of this world in preparation for the coming of the kingdom of God.

"Then he told them a parable." The problem is that Luke 21:29–38 does not sound like your typical parable. There is no story aspect to it; there is no unexpected twist or turn of events; there is no turning the kingdom upside down, no "let anyone with ears to hear." This parable is a simple analogy. Jesus compares the signs of the coming destruction to knowing that summer is coming by reading the tree leaves.

Read the tree leaves. Just as one knows that summer is near when the trees sprout new growth, so when we see such destruction on the earth, we know the kingdom of God is near. How could something so simple cause so much trouble and angst over the centuries? How could such clear signs—famines, persecutions, leaves—create such confusion? The kingdom of God is near. The signs themselves are not problematic; they are easy to read: wars and

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“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and waves” (v. 25), “the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (v. 26), and the peoples of the nations will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory” (v. 27). As extraordinary events, these signs will be obvious to all people, but only Jesus’ disciples will see and know what these signs mean.

Martin Luther seems to take this route of interpretation in his “Sermon for the Second Sunday in Advent,” claiming that there will be “great and many signs” that will stand apart from all that has come before in the history of the world. The description Jesus gives of the signs provides a sort of road map by which Jesus’ followers will know what to look for in history. For his part, Luther sees these signs happening in his own time: “These words and signs of Christ compel me to believe that such is the case. For the history of the centuries that have passed since the birth of Christ nowhere reveals conditions like those of the present. There has never been such building and planting in the world.”²

A second way to answer the question, suggested elsewhere in Luther’s writings, is that these signs will be obvious only to faith. While ordinary human understanding looks for extraordinary signs and displays of power, faith recognizes the work of God in the least likely of places. Christian faith, as Luther explains, interprets God’s work in the world in and through the humiliation of the cross. As the Magnificat declares, “God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (1:52–53).

Faithful perception depends on not only an interpretive framework of beliefs one holds in mind but a practical understanding of the whole person. This practical understanding of faith is first embodied in baptism where one dies to a life of sin and rises to new life in Christ. As with any practical understanding, however, this baptismal faith must be continually practiced, lest it be lost. As Jesus warns, “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life” (v. 34). As these words of warning imply, the exercise of faith is not something that takes place above or apart from ordinary life, but something one practices in response to the temptations, doubts, and worries of this life.

2. Martin Luther, *The Sermons of Martin Luther* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 1:63.

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advice on a hand-held device, personal music and video, private mobility, and instant communication. There is little time to be on guard. We forget to be on guard. It is not a priority to be on guard.

“Watch” and “be on guard” are ancient reminders of the early life of the faithful followers of Jesus. These commands were made in the context of lives that were focused on detail and life work that conformed to specific ritual and very specific laws. It is hard to imagine that after two thousand years we remain a people who are constantly distracted. Now our distractions are from human-made resources that command us to look away from the signs that should order our lives and our attention.

Jesus is teaching at the temple with the knowledge that his time is at an end. The people who follow him are about to enter a time of change and decision making. Jesus wants their commitments and allegiances to be the result of considered and reflective choices. He requires no less of all of us.

We can choose, anytime we want, to skip complex analysis of events and situations. We should mind the virtual as a mode that is not real, while considering the real signs of life that surround us in the world. We are asked to engage in reflection, heeding the admonition of Jesus to watch and be on guard. It is the challenge of the Christian in community to receive the lessons nature teaches us through the seasons and cycles of life. Jesus offers a parable about the fig tree and all of the trees (v. 29) as a way to deal with changes that are imminent. A meditation on natural changes reminds us that we have in our immediate vision and cognition an understanding that life is not stagnant, and that changes abound. The natural world reminds us that forward movement through difficult times is required for survival.

In times of crisis our society teaches us to depend on a combination of fear, blame, and suspicion. We rely on what is outside in the airwaves to give us information that may construct a response to a violent or deadly incident. It is possible that Jesus may be constructing a resource for the faithful that suggests a firm resolve for living in a perpetual state of preparedness. “Be on guard” (v. 34) invites a spiritual engagement with the world that calls upon our ability to live through difficult times with spiritual preparedness, prayer, and strength (v. 36), to escape from the wearisome worries that the world defines as normative.

In the end of this passage, we can imagine Jesus exhausted and spent from teaching and preaching to the people in the temple. Heeding his own message,

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the end will be unadorned by mysterious signs decipherable only by those in the know. Instead, the end's arrival will be as obvious as a spring blossom. This parable (only Luke calls it a parable) is also an antiparable. Just as no veil obscures the idea that the spring bloom anticipates summer, so too is there no deep insight in the proclamation that the Son of Man's appearance in the clouds anticipates his arrival. While this parable is far from profound, its straightforwardness perfectly fits its message against probing profound depths.

This reading of the parable of the Fig Tree, as discouragement of looking to heaven or earth for mysterious signs that the kingdom is imminent, finds further support in the first chapter of Luke's second volume. Acts 1 and Luke 21 share several close connections. After Jesus' resurrection the disciples reasonably ask him again whether the kingdom will now be restored (Acts 1:6). Rather than telling them that they will know it when they see it, here Jesus informs them that the time of the kingdom's coming is not for them to know. What is coming instead is the Holy Spirit, who will inspire them to witness to the kingdom. Jesus then ascends into heaven in a cloud, leaving the disciples standing, gazing up toward heaven, until two divine figures tell them to stop, since Jesus will return in the same way. So the disciples are again discouraged from looking up for signs that Jesus is returning, since they will know it when they see it. In light of Acts 1, the message of Luke 21:29–33 is all the more clear: look at the fig tree and not to heaven or earth for signs that the end time is near.

Jesus proclaims a different message in the second half of this passage (vv. 34–38). Each version of the Synoptic apocalypse ends with Jesus' exhortations in one way or another to "stay awake," "keep alert," or "be watchful." Luke's particular ethic is most evident in the warning of verses 34–35a, present only in Luke: "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with . . . the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap." A number of scholars have demonstrated that Luke tones down the urgency of apocalyptic expectations that the end is near that are found in Mark and preserved in Matthew. This is often connected to a cause and an effect: because he believes that God's plan from the beginning involves the gospel's expansion "to the ends of the earth," Luke cannot hold urgent eschatological expectations; because Luke does not think that the world is just about to end, he develops a more advanced social ethic.

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rumors of wars, even armies surrounding Jerusalem. What then is parabolic about this, when the correlation is so simple? One homiletical direction is to focus on the word "near."

The usual connotation of the word "near" in this context is a reference to chronological time. We are conditioned as students of the apostle Paul to think "near" means this afternoon, tomorrow morning, next week. Yet one apocalyptic prediction after another utterly fails, the most recent being the end of the world coming on December 21, 2012, according to some readings of the Mayan calendar. While we cannot discount the nearness of an actual day, one homiletical tack is to reflect on "near" as vicinity, locale, the neighborhood that is inhabited by a community of faith, in essence, as the "here." This is more faithful to the Lukan "The kingdom of God is among you" (17:21).

When "near" becomes immediate locale, rather than a habitual tomorrow, then sure enough, the kingdom of God is upon us, is around us, is *near*, even *here*, and this generation will not pass away until these things have taken place; these things *are* taking place! Understanding "near" as locale rather than the tomorrow that never comes ratchets up the stakes for our preparation. One sermon direction is to look at the "near" in this passage as "here."

The signs are all around us; so be prepared. Another direction for preaching this text is one of preparation. Preparation has to do with one's heart, one's life focus, one's priorities, one's alertness, keeping one's wits about oneself. Preparation is not along the lines of the popular survivalist training or multi-million-dollar doomsday shelters. Preparation in the Lukan sense is a state of one's heart and affections. On the other hand, dissipation has to do with wasting away due to excess. Drunkenness—or excess in the pleasures of the world or gluttony—dulls one's senses and leaves one ill prepared for the coming destruction and the nearness of the kingdom. Habitual drunkenness leads to a physical wasting away; Jesus fears that if we are intoxicated by things that dull our spiritual sensitivities, our kingdom life will suffer.

Another preaching direction is to imagine a twenty-first-century risk assessment of the nearness of the destruction that will accompany the kingdom of God. The likelihood of an event's happening is evaluated, as well as the severity of the consequences, should the event occur. The greatest risk to an institution or endeavor is that event that is most likely to occur and also has the most severe consequences, should it occur.

Luke 21:29–38

Theological Perspective

Having the strength to exercise faith depends upon prayer. Hence, Jesus tells his followers: “Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man” (v. 36). Prayer gives one the strength to meet the trials and temptations of daily life because prayer orients people away from the cares of this world and toward the redemption of God. This reorientation is again a matter not only of the mind but of the whole person. In prayer, Jesus commands, “stand up and raise your heads” (v. 28). These bodily movements then are informed by but also informing of one’s sense that “redemption is drawing near” (v. 28). Where daily life “weighs down,” prayer enables one to rise up and look beyond the immediate worries and cares of life. As Lutheran ethicist Martha Stortz suggests, “prayer expands the horizon of vision from the landscape of a solitary life, family, or country to the geography of God.”³

The importance of prayer for living faithfully in the world is evident in Jesus’ own life. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus’ activity of healing, preaching, and teaching among the people is punctuated by his withdrawal to the Mount of Olives to pray, “as was his custom” (22:39; cf. 4:16). This custom that has served throughout his life as a source of strength serves also on the night of his death to give him the strength to rise up and stand as the first among many.

TERESA SWAN TUIITE

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he spends the night on the Mount of Olives (v. 37), away from the stress of the people, in a place of prayer and reflection.

The shape of our faith in times of crisis and change and confusion carries us from uncertainty to becoming persons of reliable faith. Watching for signs and being on guard and attentive to the natural world around us—the world of wonders and change—inform the ability to live through difficult circumstances. Jesus models this! To the crowds who follow him he tells stories to guide their understanding of signs. He teaches those who come to the temple how to be on guard and move away from worry. Jesus goes to a quiet place to ready himself for the trials that he cannot escape. The only adequate, informed source of meeting the crises to come is to be prepared, prayerful, attentive to the signs of the natural world, and warned that the kingdom of God is always near (v. 31).

It is not safe to suggest a formula for a remedy for change or the alleviation of grief in times of crisis. It is credible to use the Scripture as an age-old guide to reflection and preparation faithfully to engage change and deal with crisis. These things are natural, a part of life and the life cycle. There is no remedy for loss, change, grief that comes from the mechanical or technical resources of our worldly lives. Sustenance through trials is a gift of the faithful regard of signs, remaining on guard, and the practice of prayer, for the Bible tells us so.

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3. Martha Stortz, “Practicing Christians: Prayer as Formation,” in *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, ed. Karen Bloomquist and John Stumme (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 66.

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Jesus' lessons against having one's head in the clouds (vv. 29–33) and against having one's heart weighed down (vv. 34–36) are best understood in light of Luke's ethical concerns. The former lesson seems clear enough: searching for a kingdom or Savior's intervention from elsewhere does not easily translate into collaborative efforts with the Spirit to realize and testify to the kingdom here and now. The latter may be more difficult; for Luke's Jesus, a heart heavy with the concerns of daily life inhibits (rather than facilitates) positive political programs and ethical activities. Similar statements occur in 12:22–23 (“do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body . . . for life is more than food”) and in 8:14, which says that the cares of life are what choke the word of God. Relating to our lives in their “spontaneous” states alone is deadly to the gospel's proliferation.

The problem is not that our daily, bodily lives do not matter. The problem is that, by attending to them alone, we ignore both the kingdom that gives rise to their conditions and any other kingdom that could condition them differently. To break out, we need to perceive our bodily existences as products of concrete, systemic kingdoms (neither abstract kingdoms unsullied by concrete lives nor isolated lives unaffected by concrete kingdoms). By so distancing our perspectives on our lives from their “bare” states, we open up the possibility of participating in and witnessing to God's kingdom.

We will not perceive God's kingdom if we imagine only insular bodily existences (our concerns with our bare-life-world alone will choke out any possible kingdom) or if we imagine the kingdom as intervening from an abstract elsewhere; if we are busy looking for it, it will never arrive. God's kingdom emerges only if we pursue what our bodies and lives might be capable of as witnesses to it. The kingdom cannot exist if we look for it elsewhere or refuse to look for it here. Jesus' final words in his public ministry in Luke suggest that living as incessant witnesses to a kingdom that is not elsewhere changes the conditions of life here, by opening them up so that such a kingdom can emerge.

DAVIS HANKINS

Homiletical Perspective

The coming of the kingdom of God, accompanied by devastation over the whole face of the earth, is an event, according to Luke's Jesus, that is highly likely to occur, and the consequences when it does occur are severe.

If one were to do such a risk assessment in a business or school or not-for-profit or church or family, and a catastrophic event were highly likely to occur, resulting in the most severe consequences, one would make proper preparations. One would do something to reduce the likelihood of the occurrence and to mitigate the consequences, were it to occur. There is no reducing the likelihood of the coming of the kingdom of God; in fact, it is already here. Therefore, what kinds of preparations need to be made?

Finally, we have a dual understanding of time. The last sentences of the passage give a description of a teacher going to temple by day and resting in the coolness of a hill by night: a daily rhythm of teaching and resting. The daily rhythm of teaching and resting, however, gives way to teaching about the end of time and the end of Jesus' earthly time of teaching.

This final passage in the public ministry of Jesus is as much about time as about preparation and alertness. We live in the here and now, but we are always aware of the future and what it might bring. We worry about the future in terms of our finances and global economics, in terms of the health of our children and the values of our children—the children of our immediate families, the children of our congregations and communities, and the children of this generation. We worry about the future in terms of wars and rumors of war.

If we were to gather up all these concerns, we might say that the distractions of this world—be they power, wealth, drunkenness, or even single-minded concern for our families—all may distract us from a needful focus on a faith consciousness, a kingdom focus, the here and now, and at the same time, that which is to come.

NANCY LAMMERS GROSS