

Telling Our Stories

Luke 21:5-19

Sunday, November 13, 2022

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Jesus prepares the disciples to face moments of calamity and pain by pointing them to the things which endure and reminding them, "I will give your words."

There was a little bit of family drama playing out at CVS a few nights ago. I had stopped to pick up prescriptions and to get my flu shot. While I was waiting, a father and his grade-school aged daughter were waiting to receive their vaccines. While there was no evidence that the girl was an anti-vexer, it was clear she was not exactly pro-vaccine, either. The privacy partition could not hide her anxiety and apprehension, and you can believe me when I say I was not eavesdropping. People all the way over in the dairy aisle could hear her protestations.

The girl could scream, and this is from a father who raised three daughters. "Apprehension" is too mild a description. This was all-out fear bordering on hysteria. I was 20 feet away in another aisle trying hard to look like I was comparison shopping baby shampoo. And when the pharmacist brought out the needle, her meltdown was nearly Biblical.

Jesus' words in Luke came to mind: "nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, there will be great earthquakes and in various places famines and plagues and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven."

At this point, neither her father's calm assurances, or the pharmacist's appeal to science were proving helpful. The girl vowed that she would rather get the flu and Covid AT THE SAME TIME than the shot. Her father kept reassuring her, "You do this every time, and it always turns out ok." From my experience, I wanted to tell him that at this point there are only two ways out of his predicament, one of which included promises of copious amounts of ice cream. The other involves a fast immunization technique.

I'm sure you know how the story ends: she got her shots, and the world did not end. After my shot, I saw them over in the ice cream section. Everything was going to be ok.

There's no logical way of explaining to a child that a needle, even a relatively small needle, isn't going to hurt. It's counter intuitive. Someone holding something sharp lacks the credibility to provide assurances this is not going to hurt. The little girl was smart, and had been paying attention to the signs and circumstances around her and had decided this was not going to be a pleasant experience. And while it was hardly apocalyptic, her experience is a small example of the way various religious movements over the centuries have paid attention to what Jesus calls "these things," and have come to similar conclusions: this is going to hurt.

Her only hope was a slight paraphrase of Jesus' words: "By your endurance you will gain Rocky Road."

For centuries, even millennia, followers of Jesus Christ have read these apocalyptic passages of scripture and have become convinced that theirs would be the last generation. In recent years the most prominent example of this were followers of radio preacher Harold Camping who spent thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of dollars putting up billboards announcing that the world would come to an end at 6 p.m. on May 21, 2011. In case you are wondering, it didn't happen.

This was an update from some of Camping's earlier prophecies, which included a predication that the world would end on September 6, 1994. When Jesus did not appear on May 21, 2011, Camping withdrew from the public eye after that, later begrudgingly admitting that probably no one could ever know when the end of the world would come. (Sidenote: he probably would have saved himself a lot of money had he become a Presbyterian.)

The Bible names these scriptures "apocalyptic," which means "revelation." While we most often think of the Book of Revelation, there are many other examples of apocalyptic literature as well, including this chapter from Luke.

A few years ago, a church somewhere made a change to its outdoor sign a few days after Halloween to read, "Jesus is coming. Hopefully before the election." Jesus' concern, however, is not about the outcomes of an election, but rather about the faithfulness of the people of God—a people who are called to offer their witness to the redemption promised by God. We are called to be a people, says Jesus, who anticipate God's coming to us by a faithfulness that persists even when life is most painful and seemingly all hope is lost. It is at those times that hope stands firm. This witness emerges from our testimony about being prepared and standing firm—even when there seems to be no end in sight of our suffering.

The danger is to avoid falling into either a ludicrous literalism or a paralyzed hopelessness, to be diligent without, as Jesus says, being led astray.

I once had a phone call from someone who asked if the church collected food for food pantries. I said we did, and that it could be dropped off at the church during business hours. The person said this situation was a bit different, and that in any case there was much more than they could managed to get to the church. Would it be possible for someone to bring a truck or a van around to their home and pick it up?

Always up for an adventure, I agreed to stop by. What I found were about 12 large plastic storage containers stacked along a hallway. Each container held dozens of pre-packaged emergency food. The person said that their late spouse had believed that the world

would be coming to an end and wanted to be prepared for Armageddon. (Side note: If the world is really coming to an end, I do not think you will need dehydrated food.)

Jesus is aware, however, that calamities, wars, and disasters will always grab attention and make headlines. At times this clamoring for the end of times leads to harmful conclusions like preachers assigning God's judgment to natural disaster. Jesus discounts these false teachers, offering the assurances of hope that the girl in the pharmacy longs for and the apocalyptic preachers can't provide.

Instead, he calls upon the disciples to be prepared. Such preparation does not mean carrying around a keynote speech in your hip pocket, or hoarding canned food necessarily, but instead involves one of the most precious aspects of practicing a faith that has been honed by the riches of Christian community.

Chapter 21 begins by reminding us that Jesus is paying close attention to what is happening around him. His disciples seem to be eyeing the temple's ornate stones and rich offerings much like tourists gaping at the Statue of Liberty. But Jesus' eye moves beyond the impermanence of the temple. Instead, as Luke shows, he spies a poor widow maneuvering her way through the crowds. Her tiny, ancient hands cling to two copper pennies. They are all that she has. It is an impossibly meager offering, but with the confidence of one who belongs body and soul not to herself but to God, she flings them into the kettle.

The dull sound they make is the cry of faith. It is this sight that captures Jesus' attention, not the beautiful sanctuary filled with the rich offerings and gleaming artwork. His disciples gawk at the building, their jaws dropping in amazement and awe. But Jesus says: all of this will fade. All of these stones will one day collapse. This will all be reduced to rubble and thrown down.

It's an impossibility that the disciples could not imagine, but also one that rang true for Luke's audience, who were hearing these stories after the temple's destruction. Those who had witnessed the dismantling of the temple were also witnesses to something greater: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This, then, is the story we are compelled to tell one another: by our endurance, we will gain our souls.

For some, this will not be enough. They see these words only as a tale told by previous generations who lacked knowledge of science or reason. For others, the idea of testifying about faith is about as appealing as snitching on the Mafia. Presbyterians well understand this: we would almost always opt for the witness protection program. It's not just that our palms get sweaty out of fear of what we might say. We do not know what to say about faith.

We have decided that words like “witnessing” and “testimony” should either remain in the courtroom or be used only in the hands of trained professionals. But it turns out that the stories we tell of faith do not need to be polished gems or even perfectly crafted. Indeed, the promise of Christ here is that we will be given the right words at the right time. We do not need to rehearse a speech, but only be willing to allow others see the promises we have found to be true. We only need to tell the truth.

Novelist Reynolds Price once said that the world is full of stories, but humans are searching for that one, true, solitary story we can ultimately trust. “While we chatter or listen all our lives in a din of craving,” Price wrote, “jokes, anecdotes, novels, dreams, films, plays, songs, half the words of our days—we are satisfied only by the one short tale we feel to be true: history is the will of a just God who knows us.”¹

Testimony, Jesus tells us, is the story we tell when the world is falling apart all around us.

Many of you know that last week I was called away from our celebration dinner to the scene of a horrific accident. A young man, whose name was Caleb, just seventeen years old, was walking with two friends along the train tracks in Castlewood State Park. Who knows why they were there or why they had decided to walk along those tracks. What does matter is that somehow they heard but could not see the train that was approaching. By the time they did see it, it was too late for Caleb, and he was killed instantly. His friends, somehow, managed to run out of the way.

That was about two hours before I got to the scene. As a chaplain, our role is to be present. We are called to be witnesses to those who face the most bitter of life’s bitter moments. You have asked how I am, and the answer is that truthfully it was awful. But there was another truth that held me that day, which I believe held those first responders, and which I believe holds young Caleb’s marvelous family. We will be betrayed by things that are familiar to us, says Jesus, but not a hair of our heads will perish. Our witness is not shaped by fancy words, but by the story of the grace of Jesus Christ who stands with each of us in the hardest moments of our lives. That is what I know. And that is my testimony. Amen.

¹ Quoted in Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, p. 29.