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November 13, 2016 – Proper 28
Luke 21:5-28

As we come to the end of the year, we also start getting more of the doom and gloom. Here the disciples are looking at the temple. Though its current incarnation isn't quite as ostentatious as it was under King Solomon, it is still a sight to behold. During its day it's even believed to be the largest religious building in the world. Not bad for a backwater little country that no one really cares about.

Thankfully, Jesus is never one to support people putting their trust in the wrong things. The temple becomes an example of what happens with false trust. It's a lesson that Israel has to learn over and over again. Whether it's the temple, or the city of Jerusalem, the country as a whole, or their heritage as descendants of Abraham, all of these things will eventually crumble and come to nothing. Often their destruction is a direct result of people putting their trust in those things to save them, as God demonstrates none of these things have any real power.

In this case the Jews have put their trust in Jerusalem and the temple yet again and Jesus declares that it is all going to fall apart, just like it did before at the time of the exile. But this time there's something more. Jesus doesn't seem to be talking about the upcoming destruction of Jerusalem exclusively. This is something bigger, something worse. This is something that's going to be felt around the world. Jesus also seems to be directing this at the disciples, and at the church as a whole. He doesn't say they've done anything particularly wrong, so this isn't like the judgment that comes for the Israelites in the exile or shortly after Jesus' time. Nevertheless, disaster is coming and there isn't much anyone can do about it.

This has been a pretty interesting year so far. Early on in the presidential race, when the Democratic and Republican primaries were still underway, it felt like there were some pretty good things brewing. There were candidates who had some good things to say and were standing firm on important issues. There were candidates who were trying to live out their Christian faith and bring good and God-pleasing ideas to a government whose priorities are often anything but God-pleasing. But, as the primaries passed, it became increasingly evident we weren't going to have anything of the sort. While the previous few presidential elections have certainly had their own share of anger, they haven't been anything like this year's election. The amount of rage and despair that have been circulating over the election has been unprecedented. When you have both Republicans and Democrats declaring not only that the other candidate is going to bring about the downfall of the country, but even saying their own candidate is just as bad, it really makes you wonder what's going on with the world.

Now the election is over. All of the mud-slinging from the campaign trail may be over, but having a new president doesn't mean things are any more sure or certain. All we do know is that, barring some unforeseen disaster, our president will be with us for the next four years. What comes of that presidency at this point is anyone's guess.

Suddenly, the end of the world scenario Jesus describes doesn't seem so far off. What's going to happen to us? Will riots and revolution be the order of the day? There's certainly a lot of smoldering anger that has been threatening to boil over and it hasn't just gone away. Many people in this country think their political opponents are sweeping them away and will laugh while they do it. Their opponents will look down their noses at people who are clearly too stupid to vote for the right candidate and now have lost. No, there's a lot of hostility and it hasn't gone away. How it will be dealt with still remains to be seen and it could have a number of very scary

outcomes. Whether you voted for the winner or loser, you could still end up suffering collateral damage in the midst of this back and forth battle.

All of that chaos just takes into account what's going on right now in our own country and says nothing about the rest of the world. Who knows what the reaction of other countries will be to all of this. Much of the western world is going through upheaval and this year certainly hasn't made things any better. The European Union has been sinking in a downward spiral over the last couple of years. Greece has no money and Britain left altogether. Will all of Europe devolve into petty squabbling? Will all of the anger and hostility brewing there cause everyone to close up their borders and wait it out or maybe turn to something more aggressive? What will our relationship with the countries of the world be like under the new presidency? We see repeatedly that things that happen here in America affect the world. All of this uncertainty here can have a devastating effect on our own economy and may combine with other chaos around the world to send everything flying out of control. The Great Depression happened once before and, despite all of the safeguards in place, something similar could strike again.

With all of this going on, it's not hard to see the things Jesus talks about becoming a reality. All of that doesn't even take into account the specifically Christian side of things either. How does the church fair in all of this? The church is increasingly unwelcome in the Western world. When you have societies holding up things like abortion, homosexuality, greed, and self-made truth as good and noble values, the church finds a war on the very doorstep. With many denominations giving in and following right along behind what society wants, those of us who are left end up fighting an even tougher battle. Now we have to defend our view of what's right and also explain why we don't do things just like all of the other Christians out there. With Christian businesses being sued into the ground, there's a lot of fear out there for those who know they need to stand up for their beliefs. Others are fired for holding beliefs that may be contrary to their employers or their coworkers.

None of this is really new. All of these things were already taking place during the lives of the apostles. All but one of the apostles are believed to have died well before their time, most in gruesome ways. The church has always been on the outsider in world that is always looking for ways to throw it out.

So you look at the current events, you look at all of the things that could happen in the future, all of the things that could go disastrously wrong and you start to worry. What's going to happen in your lifetime? What's going to happen in your children's lifetime? Is anywhere safe, or is it all just going to come crashing down? Do we just hide away somewhere and wait for it all to be over?

Yes, life in this world is going to be bad. Yes, there are things to fear around every corner. Yes, there are disasters that threaten to destroy everything we hold dear. That's why the surprise ending Jesus throws here is so interesting. He doesn't console and commiserate. He doesn't pat you on the shoulder and say, "There, there. I know it's difficult but you'll get through it." That's what you'd expect from Jesus. Whenever Jesus encounters people suffering or in misery, he offers words of comfort and healing. But not here. This is not Jesus saying, "You'll be ok." This is Jesus saying, "You will triumph." This is not Jesus offering consolation. This is Jesus proclaiming victory.

This is the mystery that God has been showing us all along. Just when everything seems hopeless is actually when God is doing the most powerful things. The helpless misery of the Israelites in slavery in Egypt became the Passover, their salvation from the plagues of God's wrath and then their subsequent crossing of the Red Sea, leaving the land of slavery behind

forever. We also see Christ going to the cross. We see the darkness covering the sky and hear the wailing of the women who looked on and watch the disciples scattering, thinking all is lost. Only then do we see God is actually accomplishing his greatest work yet, as he brings salvation to the world. In some respects, Jesus is preparing the disciples for that very event, as the Last Supper is just a short time away in the next chapter. But this message also looks much further into the future and is intended for a much broader audience, the church throughout the ages.

In the church year, we're entering into that odd in-between time where we look forward to Jesus' return and when the clock resets and we start again with the season of Advent and the birth of Christ. The birth of Christ is also a sign of weakness, as Almighty God is born as a tiny baby, and yet Christ's birth is foretold by the angel who says, "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." God is tiny and weak and at the same time he is the mighty king who reigns forever.

This contrasts with the passage for today, which comes after All Saints' Day, in that time of the church year that focuses on the result of all of this. In the midst of the chaos, the fear, the warfare and destruction, the persecution and misery, the apparent inability of God to care for the world, Jesus wants us to remember what he says here. This is another example of God working just as he always has. What looks like weakness to us is, in fact, God's strength. In this case, these ongoing catastrophes are a sign that God is about to complete his final victory.

This message from Christ is always with, reminding us of God's plan. Christmas comes, and the birth of the one who comes in weakness and yet will save his people from their sins. We live in a time of fear and doubt and Jesus brings us salvation through his weakness and death on the cross. Now in the time of our weakness, we look to God's strength. God does offer comfort and consolation, but here God also speaks of victory, victory over fear, victory over pain, victory over death. Christ is coming in glory to reign over his kingdom forever. So as you look to the future and you see the terrors and disasters around you, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.