

FIRST LESSON: Malachi 4:1-2
SECOND LESSON: Luke 21:5-19
November 13, 2022

“It’s the End of the World as We Know It”
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You’re going to die. **But not a hair on your head will perish.** Terrible dreadful things are about to happen. **But don’t worry about it.**

I hate preaching on the end times.

The lectionary, that fount of wisdom that gives pastors a choice of scriptures to preach on so congregations get a balanced diet goes bonkers when it comes to the end times. For some reason that I have never been quite able to fathom they want ministers to preach on the second coming of Christ throughout Advent. I want to preach on the first coming of Christ during Advent. So I’m giving them one week now. And then I plan to ignore them until after Christmas.

The language of this text is in a genre called apocalyptic. By genre I mean a type of literature, like mysteries, or biography or romance novels. It’s the “it’s the end of the world as we know it” category. There are a few other places in scripture that are apocalypses—like the book of Revelation and Daniel in the Old Testament. There’s also a large number of apocalypses that did not make it into our bible. The word apocalypse actually means revelation, which is why we have the book of Revelation. It’s a word that derives from another Greek word which literally means pulling the lid off something. Apocalypses are written in symbolic language and are all about revealing hidden things concerning the end of the world. And some people are obsessed them. You’ve probably met some of those people.

By the time the gospel of Luke was written the main event mentioned here had already happened. The temple was destroyed in the year 70. Luke’s gospel was written about 10 to 15 years later. Herod’s Temple was an amazing structure, 15 stories high, constructed of enormous blocks of stone covered in gold. It could be seen for miles and miles. But the Romans took the gold and set fires around all the stone causing it to break down and implode. The Temple looked like it would last forever, until it didn’t.

The intense persecution of Christians had also already begun by the time Luke was written. People were rejected by family and friends for their faith. They were hauled before governing boards to account for their faith. And for those who refused to recant, they were killed in the arena for the entertainment of the masses. It was not the main event you understand. Throwing Christians

to the lions was something that took place during intermission while everyone went to buy snacks and waited for the next battle of gladiators. Christians were included among the general population of criminals who were sentenced to death at that time.

False Messiahs also appeared quite early on. The book of Acts speaks of Theudas who led four hundred followers to disaster and Judas the Galilean. There was also an unnamed Egyptian who led four thousand followers to an ignominious end. And after this time in the early 2nd century Bar Kokhba led a fatal rebellion that led to the complete destruction of Jerusalem.

In every era there are people who identify specific events with these words of Jesus. But nations have always risen against other nations, and kingdoms against kingdoms. There have always been great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places. Covid is not unique. Ebola is not unique. They might be terrifying diseases, but we have had terrifying diseases before. People thought the end of the world had come during the Black Plague, and we could not blame them for thinking so, as a quarter of the population died. People thought the end of the world had come with the Holocaust, and that too would have been a reasonable conclusion. Fearful events and great signs from heaven occur in our world. Jesus' language was standard apocalyptic. And the purpose of standard apocalyptic is not what we think. The purpose behind this kind of language is not to terrify, but to give us the strength to persevere through whatever life brings. It's God's way of warning us that it is not going to be an easy ride. Sin and evil have taken care of that. We live in a broken world. Life is a battle and always will be a battle.

Jesus regularly used hyperbole, or extreme language, to get his point across. It was a common stylistic technique. He said things like, "if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off." He did not mean this literally. We humans are just a bit slow to get the message. We don't do subtle. It generally takes things like our house being on fire or under water before we realize we need to do something about climate change. Unless we're in pain or have some other drastic symptoms most of us tend to ignore our health. I only change the oil in my car when Vicki issues an ultimatum. Just ask her. Sometimes God has to lay things out in extreme terms to get our attention.

So what does God need us to know?

1. Being a Christian does not mean life will be easy.
2. God has a plan and will be with us.
3. We should not try to project ahead of time how we will handle a crisis. God will give us the right words when we need them.
4. We should not put our trust in things. Buildings and neighborhoods can be destroyed overnight by storms, war and terrorism.
5. And finally, in the end, **God wins.**

We may claim that we know that being a Christian doesn't mean life will be easy, but there is a very strong undercurrent in American Christianity that gives us a steady stream of the opposite message. Most of us can see through the almost cartoonish extremes of the prosperity gospel movement. Tammy Bakker wore so much make-up her face cracked when she smiled. Benny Hinn looks like a cult leader. And Oral Roberts claimed once that God would "take

him home” unless he raised 8 million dollars, which he then did. Creflo Dollar? Seriously. The name speaks for itself. What we are less aware of is the subtle infiltration of prosperity gospel ideas. In 2004, Joel Osteen published a book called, “Your Best Life Now.” A year later Oprah turned that into “Live your best life.” Now, that phrase has gone mainstream. Living your best life means getting everything you want out of life. The center of this dynamic is self. Sickness and poverty are not part of the equation. A rewarding career, a happy marriage, and no worries whatsoever are. God wants us to live to our full potential, we are told. And everyone gets to feel special. People are taught that God chose them to be uniquely blessed with prosperity and happiness. The problem is, it doesn’t hold up in real life. What happens if we get cancer, or are in a car accident? Does that mean that God doesn’t love us? What happens when money is tight and tempers are short? What happens when the children aren’t perfect and the in-laws are out-laws? What happens when loved ones die?

The prosperity gospel teaches that Jesus’ atonement not only covered our sin, but also removed poverty and sickness from our life. **Jesus never taught this.** But this false gospel is popular because it’s what people want to hear. It’s so popular it has now spread around the world. *And it’s a lie.*

God does have a plan and will be with us, but God is at the center of that plan. We are not. God does provide. I have experienced many, many times in my life when God has taken care of my needs, right down to somebody knocking on the door and handing me food when I didn’t have any. I have been that broke. A lifetime ago I lived in a Glasgow tenement flat with two babies and a husband making below poverty wages. But God takes care of needs, not greeds. And God expects us to be part of meeting the needs of others.

God also does not want us to project ahead, which is maybe one of the hardest things to do. We’re not good at staying in today when tomorrow is looming. When there’s a conflict coming in our minds we play out all the worst case scenarios. Sometimes we’re facing a tough situation and we know we’re going to need the right words, so imaginary dialogues fill our heads. *It could go this way . . . it could go that way . . . If I’m accused of something, I’ll defend myself by saying . . .* We all do this. And when the time comes it NEVER turns out like we thought it would, because we hadn’t counted on a real flesh and blood person on the other end of the conversation. God does not want us to worry ourselves into a state. God wants us to get out of the way and let God speak through us. And nowhere is this more true than when we are speaking on behalf of our faith. And here’s the trick. It might not always seem that we are speaking on behalf of our faith, but if people know that we are Christians then everything we do and everything we say represents Christ. People do watch. They do listen. The witness of our life matters. How we behave when everything hits the fan matters.

God also does not want us to trust in things. The Temple in Jerusalem, the World Trade Center, the broken cities all across Ukraine. Nothing on earth lasts forever. But we put our trust in things. We can’t help it. Our homes, our church building, the local library, all the things that make a community. We take comfort in things, especially things that are built to last. But the only

thing that lasts beyond this world is our relationship with God. Ultimately Jesus assures us that good will win out over evil. And all of our struggles, all of our striving to do the right thing, counts. We're part of a much larger process. Despite how dark some days may seem, Jesus assures us that in the end, God wins, because the end of the world is not the end. Amen.

Malachi 4:1-2

4 "Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and the day that is coming will set them on fire," says the Lord Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them. **2** But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves.

Luke 21:5-19

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.