

WHEN YOU LOOK TO THE FUTURE, WHOSE FACE DO YOU SEE?

Luke 21:25-36

When Bill Clinton ran for President, his campaign theme song was “Don’t Stop Thinking About Tomorrow” by Fleetwood Mac. That could be the theme song to today’s New Testament reading. It comes from a section in the gospel in which Jerusalem’s fall is predicted. Jesus’ statements here link the coming destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD with his return to earth. This passage makes several points. First, the destruction to come in 70 AD is distinct from but related to the return of Jesus and the end of time. Second, Jesus shows his prophetic capacity by predicting the fall of Jerusalem, which was yet to occur. Third, the fate of the nation of Israel is tied to its reaction to Jesus. Fourth, the passage reassures first century disciples that God will enable them to face persecution and will deliver them from it. Fifth, the passage, through the voice of Jesus, calls everyone to remain steadfast in faith, because God is in control. (1)

Luke depicts Jesus forecasting that the cosmos will come unglued. There will be strange signs suggesting bad things befalling us ahead – signs in the heavens and on earth’s oceans. Luke wants us to think about tomorrow.

This is apocalyptic, end time, literature. It’s full of frightening images, often in poetic form, describing the end of the world as we know it. Some Christian groups love this stuff. Their preachers sermonize on it week after week. They study Daniel from the OT and Revelation from the NT over and over. Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins sold millions of books in their *Left Behind* series. These bestsellers were all about the end times, the second coming of Christ, and the Rapture of believers.

The theology of this series is suspect and moved Tim Redden to satirize it all:

“May I help you?” the clerk asked cheerfully, as Megan browsed through the children’s book section of the Christian bookstore.

“I’m looking for something for my three-year-old,” the young mother replied. “She loves books and I want to get her something with a ‘Christian message’”

“I have exactly what you are looking for,” the sales lady replied with a wink. “It just came in and we are really excited about it...It’s the latest from Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Left Behind, the Toddler Addition.*”

“I’m not sure that’s what I’m looking for,” said the young mother, trying to be polite.

“Nonsense,” the clerk replied, taking a copy from the rack to show her. “It’s about a group of toddlers at a Christian preschool,” the clerk explained. “On a trip to a petting zoo, the school’s minivan suddenly swerves out of control.”

“Oh, how awful!” the mom exclaimed.

“It’s the rapture,” the sales lady continued. The teacher and two of the children are taken, and the rest are left behind. Look, their little clothes are still in their car seats. One little guy was taken right out of his diaper. Isn’t that cute?” (2)

Presbyterians fear to tread where others rush in. Not long ago, a Presbyterian told me she could not remember a Presbyterian sermon on the Rapture. It's not that we never preach on it, but if we do, it is usually confined to the season of Advent. And, when we do address it, we speak of the Rapture in figurative or metaphorical terms, not literally. Advent is the season to celebrate the birth of Jesus and to prepare for Christ's return at an unannounced time. The lectionary offers texts like today's from Luke that tell us to be prepared. God is up to mischief in our world. We need to be alert. Luke says: Don't stop thinking about tomorrow.

Since 9/11 we understand the need to be alert and prepared. We keep our eyes peeled for possible terrorists. Lately, churches across the country have become vigilant about potential violence. Shooters have attacked in churches and synagogues with automatic, assault weapons intending to raise hell and create casualties. They have been murderously successful. Many congregations have begun to employ plain-clothed guards and have developed evacuation plans in the event of violent intruders. We are training ourselves to "expect the unexpected." We live with a vigilance that was heretofore believed to be unnecessary.

Today, Luke tells us that Christians are to live prepared for God to come to us or call on us. There are signs for which we are to look. Know what they are, he says, and pay attention.

I am reminded of the story of the eager freshman at Grace College of the Bible in Omaha, NE, who was canvassing a neighborhood. He walked on to the porch of home and found an old man in a rocker. "Good afternoon, sir," he began. "May I ask you a question?"

"Sure," the old boy replied.

"Are you a Christian?" the student asked.

"Why, no, son," was the answer. "I'm a Thompson. The Christians live three doors down in that white frame place."

"Oh, no sir, I mean are you ready for Christ's return?"

"Well I don't know. When's he coming?"

"Could be today, tomorrow, or next week."

"Oh, no. Don't tell my wife. She'll want to go all three times."

Mr. Thompson must have been a Presbyterian. Presbyterians mostly joke about end time issues. We have a hard time taking all this seriously. Which is odd, because Jesus cautions, *"Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place..."*

Jesus told a parable: *"Look at the fig trees and all the trees, as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves that summer is near. So also when you see these things taking place you know that the kingdom of God is near."*

William Willimon, United Methodist Bishop, who shepherds people a lot like us writes: People who are well fixed... people for whom the world is stable and predictable, comfortable and bright, don't talk apocalyptically. Years ago, as a young pastor, I was asked to meet with a women's Bible study group. They met mid-morning once a week. They were studying the *Book of Revelation*. The title that was assigned to me was, "What does the *Book of Revelation* have to say to us today." There I sat in a beautifully appointed living room of a McMansion type of home sipping tea and eating cake, preparing to talk about one of the most sustained and apocalyptic texts in the New Testament. It was a beautiful day, in a beautiful place, and I was their beautiful young pastor come to present the *Book of Revelation*.

Considering the setting, the timing and all the rest, before I could stop myself I began my presentation. "What does the *Book of Revelation* have to say to us today? Well to put it simply, nothing! This book was a tract for the times. It was written for Christians *in extremis*. If you don't have anybody in jail for "political" crimes, if your world is not on fire, building falling, cities in ashes, all your hopes dashed, then this book is going to be a reach for you. Revelation was written for other people but not for us." (3)

Willimon uses hyperbole to make his point but in doing so he raises an important question. Do we Presbyterians have a hard time taking end times seriously because we are like those Jesus describes as having "*hearts weighed down with dissipation... and the worries of this life*"? That is, are we so involved in maintaining our privileged status that this apocalyptic stuff sounds at least irrelevant if not impossible?

This Advent should we pay more or less attention to biblical apocalyptic literature? Are there signs among "*the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth distress among the nations confused by the roar of the sea and the waves*"? I'd say we could easily be concerned by several disturbing signs:

- World-wide attacks on democracy by Fascists wanting a "strong man" leader;
- White supremacists on the move in America;
- A 20-year continuing war in Afghanistan with no end in sight;
- Federal deficits souring, while the stock market is declining;
- Deep political partisan divides and rancor;
- New strains of bacteria resistant to antibiotics;
- In spite of declining unemployment increasing economic disparity between haves and have-nots;
- Shrinking numbers of Christian congregations and congregants across America;
- Global warming is costing lives and inflicting a mounting economic toll.

Many of us are more worried about tomorrow and what tomorrow holds than we have been for a while. Worries about terror have diminished somewhat in recent days, but new and renewed concerns have arisen to command our attention.

But, here's the thing! Jesus counsels, "*Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, for your redemption is drawing near... When you see these things taking place, you will know the kingdom of God is drawing near.*" He adds,

“Cultivate a garden of faith, hope, and expectation. When trees sprout leaves in means summer is near. In the same when you see or experience signs of crises, you can know it means God is near. Raise your heads.”

Paul assured the Romans: *“All things work together for good for those who love God, and are called according to his purposes.”* (8:28) In the midst of our growing concerns, God is calling forth people and working through them for good. Consider these things:

- Women of color have been elected to prominent leadership positions in increasing numbers, in spite of blatant racism being displayed;
- Giant Pandas are no longer endangered;
- US – Cuba relations have thawed;
- Studies are showing that diets rich in veggies and fruit reduces cancer rates;
- Homeless rates of veterans have dropped by 50% since 2010;
- India planted a world record 50 million trees in one day to enhance the environment;
- Medical science has recently found the gene linked to ALS;
- A solar powered plane flew around the world without a drop of fuel;
- People like us in developed countries are living as much as a decade longer than our parents did;
- The city of Cleveland has finally claimed a championship in a major sport – basketball - with the victory of the Cavaliers in the NBA. (4)

Huge problems remain. However, the evidence reveals that God is working for good in all things. God’s kingdom is on the move. God calls people to help redeem his creation by joining in the kingdom work of doing justice, offering compassion, and proclaiming God’s love. Many people are doing so and there is more to be done. Jesus says pay attention to what is happening, both good and bad, around you.

In quoting Jesus as he does, Luke is telling us several extremely important things. There will be an end time. Whether it comes apocalyptically and collectively or individually in our personal deaths, an end will come. But God is in charge of all end times, personal and apocalyptic. Whenever and however our end time comes, Jesus, *“the Son of Man,”* will be directing the process. *“Your redemption is drawing near,”* Luke reports Jesus saying. Our personal endings and Christ’s return will be the time of fulfillment of all of God’s promises, a time of redemption. Remember, says Luke, it is Jesus who returns. Therefore, Luke insists by quoting Jesus, be alert and take hope. Trust in God who comes to us in Jesus Christ.

After a devastating hurricane, a Gulf Coast community was without power for three days. It became hot, humid, and miserable day and night. Rumors of looting abounded. Robberies occurred because there was no electricity, no street lights, and no way to phone police. So when the elderly couple heard a pounding on their door that evening after dark, they were frightened. Was it a robber? Was it a looter checking to see if the house was empty? There was no way to call for help. Cell phones batteries were long dead. The knocking continued. They peered out the window and tried to make out the figure on their porch. “Hey,” a voice called out. “We have a bag of ice and fresh water for you.” It was a neighbor bearing needed gifts. (4)

As we peer into the dark future, we can become anxious and even fearful. There are people and things out there of which to be afraid – bad guys and evil circumstances that could catch us in their trap. We are wise to “*be alert at all times.*” But when we look out into dark and confusing circumstances, it makes all the difference whose face we see looking back. Luke wants us to see the face of Jesus.

Advent announces that when we look over the apocalyptic horizon, we see the face of Jesus. That makes all the difference. Here’s what Luke declares to us today:

- **BE ALERT TO WHAT IS HAPPENING TODAY, BAD AND GOOD.**

- **BUT DON’T STOP THINKING ABOUT TOMORROW.**

- **FOR JESUS IS ALREADY THERE WAITING FOR YOU.**

Sources:

1. From the IVP Commentary on Luke.
2. Tim Redden, “Heaven Bound,” *The Wittenberg Door*, Nov.-Dec. 2001
3. William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 31, No. 4
4. I found these items from various internet sites using Google.
5. Adapted from *Pulpit Resource*, cited above.