
What Will Be Our Testimony?

A sermon by the Rev. Julia Mitchener
Proper 28 – Year C

When I was a child growing up in South Mississippi, there was a group from a local church that went around my neighborhood passing out leaflets and bearing witness to the work the Holy Spirit was doing in their lives. I was fascinated by these people, who, unlike the Mormons, dressed in the most fabulous clothes and talked about God in language much more exciting than what I was used to hearing in my own church. My mother always tried to be polite when these visitors came to our house, smiling and taking one of the brochures and assuring them that, yes, she knew Jesus, and, yes she believed she had been saved. Apparently she was not all that convincing, though, because the conversations tended to be lengthy. Somehow my mother always managed not to give the impression that she felt inconvenienced by these evangelical intrusions. That is, until the day two women from the church appeared with a pamphlet about the “end times” and asked if our family was prepared for the Apocalypse. I remember my mother fidgeting nervously as the women went on and on about how God’s wrath over human sin was growing and would soon be avenged by the appearance of four men on horseback. My eight-year-old self was encouraged by this news, as I had been begging for a horse for quite a while. My mother was not so encouraged, however, and, so finally, her graciousness having reached its limits, she muttered something about needing to go check on her pot roast. The next time we saw those two women coming down the sidewalk towards our house, my mother turned to me and spoke one word: “Hide!”

Hide! This may be what a lot of us want to do in response to this morning’s gospel lesson. “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom,” Jesus says in today’s reading from Luke. “There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.” Oh, and hey . . . as if that weren’t enough, “Before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you.” This is not exactly uplifting stuff, is it? It’s not what most of us come to church to hear. Besides, texts like this—so called “apocalyptic texts”—texts like this have prompted a lot of bizarre, even dangerous, thinking among Christians through the centuries. An obsession, for example, over trying to predict precisely when the world is going to end. The interpretation of catastrophic events as signs of God’s wrath.

So what are we to do with this kind of scripture passage? What are we to do with these rather unsettling pronouncements of Jesus? File them under the category of “Weird Bible Verses it’s Okay to Ignore because they Come from a Radically Different Place and Time? Go home feeling smug yet again as we think to ourselves, “Thank goodness I’m an Episcopalian and don’t have to worry about this type of thing?” Of course, given all that’s been going on in our world, we might wonder if we should actually start paying this sort of scripture a little more attention. I recently heard about a bookstore that put up a sign for its customers noting, “All apocalyptic fiction has now been moved to the Current Affairs section.” A joke for sure, but maybe not such a bad one.

Here’s the thing, though: This morning’s gospel lesson doesn’t really promote a stereotypical catastrophic “The end of the world is near” point of view. Just look at Jesus’ response when the disciples ask him to tell them when the destruction of the Jerusalem temple is going to occur. He won’t answer them directly. He’s not going to give them a date and time so they can go sell the story to the National Enquirer. And yet he takes their concerns seriously. He hears their fear, and he responds to it. “You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends,” Jesus admits, “and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.” In other words, take heart. Do not be afraid. There are hard times ahead. But take heart. *By your*

endurance you will gain your souls.

Today's gospel lesson may actually speak most powerfully to people concerned not so much about the end of the world as about the end of the world as they have known it. The end of some relationships they have held dear. The end of some of their illusions about what makes for real peace and security. The end of their trust in certain institutions. This morning's gospel lesson addresses people with these sorts of concerns. Which means that it addresses not just Jesus' earliest followers but us, too. You and I probably won't face death because we follow Jesus. We probably don't spend a ton of time worrying that the Apocalypse is near. But many of us are profoundly distressed by events currently unfolding in our nation and in our world. Many of us are mourning what seems to be the death of civility in our common life. Others are wondering what sort of future our children and grandchildren will have on a planet where access to clean water and clean air is becoming ever harder to secure. Terrible images fill our newspapers and occupy our thoughts when we can't sleep at night—images of young children in cages, of veterans living on our city streets or taking their own lives, of an opioid epidemic that has spiraled out of control and is wrecking far too many futures, of teachers and students running outside with their hands over their heads, trying to escape yet another school shooting.

In the midst of all this, Jesus still says to us, "Take heart." Take heart. *Not a hair on your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.* His words to us are words of comfort and of encouragement. But there's something else he says, too. There's something else Jesus says to his followers when they ask him what to make of the hard times they are facing. He says, "They will arrest you and persecute you . . . and [even] hand you over to prison. You will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify." Did you catch that? *This will give you an opportunity to testify.* Difficult times give Jesus' followers the chance to testify, or, in the words of the 1st Letter of Peter, they provide us with an opportunity to "give an account of the hope that is in us."

What will yours and my testimony be? In the midst of these very challenging times in which we live, what will our testimony be? Will we become trapped in cynicism, despair, or the desire for revenge? Or will we bear witness to the hope that still believes in the capacity of God to bring about a new, unexpected, redemptive, and life-giving thing?

Now, I know what you're thinking. For a lot of us, the mere notion of testifying is even more off-putting than having a conversation about the Apocalypse with perfect strangers in our living room. But testimony can take many different forms. Sometimes, the most powerful witness is that of simply showing up. Such was the case with Jesse Trotter, dean of Virginia Theological Seminary in the 1960s, who, shortly after his son committed suicide, attended a dinner for students about to graduate from the school. No one expected him to be at the dinner that night; everyone, in fact, assumed that he couldn't and wouldn't make it. Dean Trotter showed up, though. Explaining his decision, he reportedly said, "I wanted to come because I have been to the bottom these past few days. I have been to the bottom, and I wanted to come here tonight and tell you that the ground is firm."

Our testimony might look something like this—showing up to bear witness that the ground is firm, even in the midst of earth-shaking events. Or it might look like that of the pastor of a church in Memphis that I read about several years ago. This man's congregation was a conservative, highly evangelical one that had always understood its primary mission as being to convert every single person they met to Christianity. You can imagine, then, the trepidation the pastor felt when he opened the newspaper one morning to learn that a group of Muslims had bought the vacant lot across the street from his congregation and planned to begin construction on an Islamic Life Center. This pastor—by all accounts a faithful and good-hearted man—admits that when he read this news, he felt sick to his stomach. What should he do? How should he react? He hadn't a clue. So he did the only thing he could think of: He began to pray and to re-read the New Testament. The results of his study rocked him and his church to their very core. So much so, that on the day the Muslim community was to break ground on their new building, leaders of the church put up a large sign in their front yard. The sign read simply, "Heartsong Church welcomes the Islamic Center of Memphis!"

Not a hair on your head will be lost. By your endurance, you will gain your souls. This is Jesus' promise to us, and it is sure and worthy of full acceptance. If we embrace it, then we will have an opportunity to testify in many ways both big and small. Like Jesse Trotter and that pastor in Memphis, we will be able to bear witness to God's ongoing, unending work of redemption in our broken and troubled world. We will be able to give the sort of testimony that will never wear out its welcome, not even at the end of time. Amen.

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