

***“The World is Not Ending”***

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How do we respond to apocalyptic texts? How do we read prophetic passages of Scripture that reveal unfolding events with ambiguous chronologies? How are we to understand and feel about the end times? It depends quite a bit on how we’ve been taught. *Apocalypse*, for example, did not mean in the original Greek, “the destructive end of the world,” it meant, “revelation, uncovering, what God makes known about his plan for salvation” – the salvation embodied in Christ Jesus.

**Who prepares us for those times when it feels like the world is ending, in what is known as his Eschatological, or ‘End Times,’ Discourse [Luke 21:5-19].** Two days prior, Jesus made his Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, the location of the Temple. It was the global center of religious and civic life for the community of Jesus, the Jewish people. It represented for them the very dwelling place of the Lord God on earth. And it was, as some note, impressive.

Herod the Great was the Jewish king placed in power by the Roman Empire who brutally ruled the land and its people. He had, over the prior thirty years, engaged in a massive building project on and around the Temple, covering much of it in gold – big golden plates on the external walls; big golden doors; a big golden vine over the entrance with golden grape clusters as big as people. A costly and lavish reminder of Herod’s wealth and privilege.

But within a generation, it was gone. All that remains today is an outer retaining wall, the Western Wall, where people of God still make pilgrimage to pray, and leave small notes with prayers tucked into the crevices of the stones. The gold of the worldly ruler is gone; the prayers of God’s people remain.

In 66 AD, tensions between the Roman Empire and Jewish rebels erupted into war. Nation rose against nation. Rome laid siege to Jerusalem for months, causing widespread famine and disease. In 70 AD, the Roman General Titus led troops into Jerusalem, slaughtering everyone they found, destroying the city, and leveling the Temple. Hundreds of thousands of people died.

In the midst of this, Christians were suffering intense persecution. To declare “Jesus is Lord” was to declare the Roman Emperor was not, which could get you killed. Families were divided as some came to faith in Christ and others did not. Disciples were betrayed by their own relatives and friends.

Jesus lamented the escalating violence around him. He knew what so often and so tragically happens to people of faith in a faithless generation. He felt the suffering in a world broken by human sin, by the corruption of worldly power, by our grievous failures to love.

Two days after Jesus spoke these words, he himself was betrayed and abandoned by his friends. He was handed over to religious and political authorities, He was crucified, died, and was buried; and on the third day he rose from death to life. In so doing, Christ Jesus saved us. He took our death as his own and gave us his life eternal. He overcame evil with good. And one day, he will come again.

***How do you envision the second coming of Christ?***

The vision I grew up with was *apocalyptic* in the dreadful, devastating sense of the word. Christ will come again no longer the Good Shepherd, but the warrior judge with a literal sword in his hand. No longer forgiving his enemies, but slaughtering them. The earth and all its inhabitants will be destroyed in a brutal, bloody war. A select few will be caught up into heaven, and the vast majority of people who have ever lived will be sent to hell, and if you're not ready, you might be among them.

This vision left me terrified, anxious and constantly debating about when Christ will return, worried that I wouldn't be prepared. Ironically, specifically what Jesus says not to be in his end times discourse.

***There is a different vision.*** A more faithful, hopeful, loving vision. A vision that is authentically biblical. A vision that is true to the character of Christ Jesus, our Good Shepherd, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The vision that is *apocalyptic* in the reassuring, redemptive, real sense of the word.

Christ Jesus will come again as he did before – bringing heaven to earth; establishing the reign of our good and gracious God among us; healing the whole beautiful and broken creation, transforming us to be who God intended us to be all along, caretakers of what God has made in loving relationship with God and each other. “Not a hair on your head will perish.”

As Revelation declares, God will make his home among mortals. God will bring sin and suffering and death to an end. God will put the world right. In the words of St. Julian of Norwich, “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well”

***Christ Jesus did not come to condemn the world but to save it. God is not wrath, God is love. The coming of the Lord is not something to fear, the coming of the Lord is something to celebrate.***

In that day, Isaiah [12:1-6] declares, we will not be afraid. We will shout with joy because God is in our midst. We will praise the Lord for his glorious deeds. We will draw water from the wells of salvation.

In that day, Psalm 98 declares, we will join with the rivers and hills, the earth and its creations, the people of every nation, in a joyous new song to the Lord. The Lord who has done marvelous things, who has made his steadfast love and faithfulness known to all, who has set us free from bondage to sin, death, and decay. This Psalm inspired the classic hymn by Isaac Watts: “while fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains, repeat the sounding joy, repeat the sounding joy, repeat, repeat the sounding joy.” Joy to the world, the Lord is come, the Lord will come again.

In the meantime, in our life right here right now, in those moments when it feels like the world is ending...

**Jesus says to us, ‘do not believe end time predictions.’**

Anyone who says they know when Jesus will return is directly contradicting Jesus himself. Don’t buy what they’re selling. Don’t forward their social media posts, Don’t spread their misinformation.

It seems this was a problem for the church to whom Paul writes in 2 Thess [3:6-13]

Some its members, believing that Jesus would return at any moment, had decided just to wait it out. What they did in the present didn’t really matter, so why do anything at all? Why not stop working, stop contributing to the community, stop supporting the church in mission to share the good news and do the good work of Jesus? What’s more, with nothing better to do, they started gossiping, speaking untrue and unkind words about others, causing conflict and division in the church.

Paul will have none of this. He tells them to do more godly and more productive things. Work, if you can. Contribute to the church, so that the church in turn can support those who truly cannot work and are in need. Paul reminds them, what you do in this life right here and right now matters very much. So do not be weary in doing what is right

We are to follow the teaching and example of Paul, as he follows the teaching and example of Jesus.

**Jesus says to us, ‘do not be terrified.’**

Fear inhibits our ability to reason. We are wired to instantly react when we’re afraid – fight or flight or freeze. Our emotions take over and we literally can’t think straight. We’re

vulnerable to our own worst instincts, and to manipulation by those in positions of power who use fear as a weapon.

“Do not be afraid,” the most frequent reassurance in the Bible. Do not worry about what may or may not happen, but cast your cares on God because God cares for you. Bring your requests to God and the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds. Spend time with Jesus, who is gentle and humble, who will help you find rest for your weary soul. I know he has for me.

When you’re feeling afraid: pray; take a few deep breathes; call a trusted friend and talk; hang out with the people you love; go hiking or fishing or golfing; paint something or build something or write something; go back to those passages in Scripture that bring you comfort and hope – Romans 8 is one of those for me.

**Jesus says to us, ‘trust me to give you the words and the wisdom to tell people about me.’**

While we, thanks be to God, will most likely never face the persecution those early Christians faced, we may experience times when it’s difficult to speak our faith in Christ. We might think we’re not up to task or don’t know enough or don’t have all the answers. We might worry about being misunderstood or rejected.

In those times, remember that your testimony doesn’t depend on you, your testimony depends on God. The Holy Spirit is already at work in you and in the people to whom you’re speaking. Jesus has promised to give you what you need to share his good news – of great joy for all the people.

***Joy to the world, the Lord is come; the Lord will come again, and make the world new.  
Amen.***