A.M.D.G. Reign of Christ Sunday – C Text: Luke 21: 5-19

 November 20, 2016

Luke 21:5-38 The Message (MSG) **5-6**One day people were standing around talking about the Temple, remarking how beautiful it was, the splendor of its stonework and memorial gifts. Jesus said, “All this you’re admiring so much—the time is coming when every stone in that building will end up in a heap of rubble.” **7**They asked him, “Teacher, when is this going to happen? What clue will we get that it’s about to take place?” **8-9**He said, “Watch out for the doomsday deceivers. Many leaders are going to show up with forged identities claiming, ‘I’m the One,’ or, ‘The end is near.’ Don’t fall for any of that. When you hear of wars and uprisings, keep your head and don’t panic. This is routine history and no sign of the end.” **10-11**He went on, “Nation will fight nation and ruler fight ruler, over and over. Huge earthquakes will occur in various places. There will be famines. You’ll think at times that the very sky is falling. **12-15**“But before any of this happens, they’ll arrest you, hunt you down, and drag you to court and jail. It will go from bad to worse, dog-eat-dog, everyone at your throat because you carry my name. You’ll end up on the witness stand, called to testify. Make up your mind right now not to worry about it. I’ll give you the words and wisdom that will reduce all your accusers to stammers and stutters. **16-19**“You’ll even be turned in by parents, brothers, relatives, and friends. Some of you will be killed. There’s no telling who will hate you because of me. Even so, every detail of your body and soul—even the hairs of your head!—is in my care; nothing of you will be lost. Staying with it—that’s what is required. Stay with it to the end. You won’t be sorry; you’ll be saved.

**The Sky Is Falling**

I don’t know about our Chinese friends – but anyone growing up in the West is probably familiar with the folk tale ‘Chicken Little’ – first made popular in the mid 19th Century.

The story goes that Chicken Little was walking in the woods one day when an acorn fell on the top of her head. “My, oh my! The sky is falling!” she cries. “I must run and warn the others!” And so she does – gathering up Henny Penny and Ducky Lucky along the way – sweeping them along with her prediction of doom. And to this day, the phrase ‘*the sky is falling*’ is a common idiom in the English language – indicating a hysterical or mistaken belief that danger is imminent and the end is near.

Its also a phrase that Eugene Peterson picks up in his paraphrase from our scripture reading this morning – which was actually part of the lectionary for last week. It is found near the end of Luke’s gospel – where Jesus is talking about a time when it feels as if the sky is falling – and everything is coming apart at the seams. In biblical terms, this is the mini-apocalypse – meaning the end of everything as we know it …. which makes it sound pretty relevant to today and what is happening right now in our world, doesn’t it?!

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Jesus says to them, *“Watch out for the doomsday deceivers. Many leaders are going to show up with forged identities claiming, ‘I am the One’ or ‘the end is near’ …. Nation will fight nation. Ruler will fight ruler … You’ll think at times that the very sky is falling.”* *(8-11)* It depicts a world where everything is falling apart – where all hell is breaking loose. And its not one of the more popular or uplifting passages to be preaching on this morning, to be sure. But it is certainly one which speaks to the hearts and minds of many of us as we look at our own world today.

As difficult as this passage is – I find myself once again appreciating the honesty of scripture – the willingness to face the reality that terrible and troubling things do happen in our personal lives, in our social communities, and in our world. Things do fall apart. And we are called to live faithfully and with integrity in and through them.

Certainly, many of us in these days have been wondering if we are approaching such a catastrophic time once again in our days and in our world. For many – the election in the US a few weeks ago was a signal that ‘the sky is falling’ – that all is not well in our world – and that it might just be the precursor to difficult and even appalling times. So many of us find ourselves bewildered and fearful for our neighbours to the south – but indeed – what seems to be happening the US is also something that seems to be happening around the world as well. There seems to be an appetite or upsurge in our world for strong, authoritative leaders who promise that they are the ones who will ensure future prosperity and hope. We have only to look at Putin in Russia, Xi JinPing in China, Duterte in the Philippines, Orban in Hungary, Zuma in South Africa, Mugabe in Zimbabwe, Assad in Syria and Kim Jung Un in North Korea. And there has been a resurgence of right wing political movements in Europe – with Martine Le Pen poised perhaps to win as a the new leader in France. All of which has many of us worried and fearful.

The question on my mind – and those with whom I have spoken particularly over the last 10 days or so – is what does it all mean? And how do we, as people of faith, respond to all the negative and indeed, dangerous attitudes of hatred, bigotry, racism and intolerance that have reared their ugly heads with such vehemence – and seeming support – in our world today?

There is some wisdom to be found in the Bible, I think – for moving through the turbulent waters of our day– and in particular – the scripture passage we heard this morning from Luke.

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One of the responses that weaves it ways through the biblical text is that of lament. Lament has always been an essential ingredient of honest faith – an expression of sorrow, a protest over injustice, and a prayerful plea to God for help. Its also a song of faith that reiterates our trust in God to be with us in the very midst of trying circumstances. Lament is a full acknowledgement of what is happening. It refuses to look away from reality – however painful or disturbing – and invites us to grieve – not simply as an end in itself - but as a way to move forward.

By the time Luke puts the finishing touches on our passage from today’s scripture from chapter 21 – the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem has, in fact, already taken place. Luke’s gospel is dated to about 85 CE – about 15 years after the Romans have swept in with devastating force – reducing everything to the ‘heap of rubble’ he talks about in today’s reading. The people are already facing the aftermath of a society that has been turned on its head. They are in full lament mode – grieving their losses, chafing under the injustice of their situation, and wondering where God is in the midst of their difficulties.

Ten days after the events of November 8th – many of us are also feeling in full lament mode. Like Chicken Little – there is a lot of hand-wringing, and a real sense that ‘the sky is falling!’ One response is the temptation to give way to despair. Each of us is just one person after all – and the situation is so large. What are we to do?

The first advice from scripture today? *“Keep your heads, and don’t panic.”*  *(9)* To give into despair or surrender to apathy, cynicism or indifference – will be more harmful in the end. We need to be mindful of how important and significant a time this is. We are being called upon as a people of faith to live out our true Christian values more than ever. As Jesus urges us in today’s reading, *“This is an opportunity to testify.” (13)* - to respond by meeting racism, sexism, homophobia, misogyny and religious intolerance with love, respect and acceptance. To do anything else is not to follow the way of Jesus.

On Wednesday, November 9th, the day after the election in the US – the Rev. Jacqueline Lewis, a New York pastor – confronted the new dawn with resolve – and did what she knew she must. Lewis was among a group of faith leaders who organized a multifaith gathering in Washington Square Park to bring people together across faith lines in solidarity after the election. The event, she told the Huffington Post, illustrated why Trump’s election is poised to usher in not just a new reality for American democracy – but an era of American Christianity, too. “*I’m going to fight for people to have jobs, for everyone to have enough,” she said. “I’m going to fight against racism and xenophobia. I’m going to fight for black lives. I’m going to fight for LGBT rights. Wherever the anger is – wherever the violence is – I’m going to fight for love.”*

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As people of faith, ***each*** of us needs to be prepared to fight for love. “*This is an opportunity to testify …. “* Jesus tells us, “*and I will give you the words and wisdom you will need.”* So be realistic and honest. Lament – but don’t despair and give into apathy and indifference. And testify – speak from the core of your Christian values.

And in all things, says Jesus, be a people of hope. *“Every detail of your body and soul – even the hairs on your head – are in God’s care,”* he reminds us *(18)*. Or in other words, “Don’t forget – God is still with us in this mess!” I believe that our task and call as Christians is to keep our eyes peeled for the fresh possibilities that God is always cracking open in the midst of even the hardest and most difficult times. We are not alone. But we need to be partners with the Holy in helping love trump hate.

And, as a final word of wisdom this morning, our scripture today encourages us, *“Staying with it – that’s what is required. Stay with it to the end.”* *(19)* This is our sacred calling - a commitment to a holy way of love, peace and justice – and a willingness to persevere and stay engaged.

On that note, I’d like to close this morning with a poem by Taj James that I came across this week – written following the Presidential election – inviting our common commitment as people of God:

 the invitation has arrived

 to step into our courage

 and our full humanity.

 from this day forward

 the harms can only unfold

 and multiply and spread

 with our silence

 with our consent

 with our participation.

 we will not be silent

 we do not consent

 and we will not participate

 in legitimating violence, lies and division.

 the love that we are

 the love that connects us all

 the love that bends history

 even in this dark moment

 towards liberation.

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 we are one

 and we are many

 it is time

 dear friends

 the revolution of love

 must be completed.

 And it is only possible

 if on this day

 we commit our lives

 to walking the hard road

 because there is now only one way forward.

And as members of the global family - as Christians and followers of the way of Jesus - we say ‘Amen’.