

Proper 28C
Luke 21:5-19
The Reverend Bonnie Underwood
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Do Not Be Afraid

Our reading from Luke begins with Jesus telling us about the Temple. . . how this this magnificent structure, the holiest of holy sites, will be torn down. The Temple is not going to slowly crumble over the years, gently decaying due to constant, faithful use over time. Instead the Temple's end will be violent. Not one stone left atop another. A violence caused not by God, but human violence. The kind of violence we do see in much of our world: the devastation of brutality and force.

And the people are anxious. They're feeling some real distress for their families, their ways of life, and their futures, and so they ask, "Lord, when will this happen? When will this terrifying vision become a reality?"

And as in so many of Jesus' teachings, there's not a direct answer. Jesus doesn't talk about a time and place. He doesn't give them the answer they think they need, in order to alleviate their fears. But he does reassure them.

Do not be afraid. Yes, life is hard. The human-created things you think are permanent, just aren't. Yes, nations will rise against nations. There will be earthquakes, famines, and disease. There will be things in life that scare us, that make us anxious, and may even seem to point towards even worse things to come. Who among us hasn't been terrorized at some point, by those two little words, *what if?* What if this happens? or that happens?

But Jesus' message, whether heard 2000 years ago, or only moments ago, is meant to reassure us, to help us grow in our faith. It's not an easy message, but it's an important one that we hear and remember.

Do not be afraid, for God is in control. We can trust in God, for God is with us.

I can think of easier messages. Wouldn't we rather hear Jesus simply say, "Don't worry about tough times. I'm going to take care of all that. I'm going to make sure you avoid those difficulties others may experience. You'll be safe. Your life will be comfortable." But our belief in Jesus isn't a security blanket. Faith is not some magical charm, guaranteeing a cozy Christian life.

Yet Jesus does assure us that he is always with us. When those bad things in life do happen, we can trust in God. We are never alone. And Jesus knows all about our pain, our fear, and our anxiety, for our Incarnate Lord faced these same kinds of life challenges. He knew what it was to lose loved ones, to be betrayed, to be persecuted, to be treated unjustly, to be poor and oppressed — yet still, he loved us enough to sacrifice himself for us.

God is in control. And we can trust in God, for God is with us.

With God's help, the worst of times can, in unexpected ways, transform and strengthen us, building our endurance. Perhaps we've discovered that we've grown more compassionate and caring, more in-tune with the pain and suffering of others, precisely because we've faced our own life challenges. Our Savior can redeem even the darkest of times, opening new pathways for our lives, strengthening our faith, and helping us to testify to the truth.

We can trust in God, for God is with us.

This week was the culmination of our election season. The peaceful transition of power has begun between President Obama and President-elect Trump, just as we have come to expect in this great country. But this tough election season has exposed some gaping wounds. And I purposefully use the word *exposed*... for although political rhetoric has certainly been ugly, this election season didn't create the wounds, but it certainly has exposed them — wounds that have been festering for years, some even for generations. And if we thought we were past it all, we can now see the truth of how deeply divided we still are as a nation . . . we are divided by race, religion, gender, and sexuality. We are now aware that there are those who have long felt themselves unheard, alienated, and disenfranchised. Sure, there has been some progress over the years, but we need the humility to be honest where we are weak and ask for God's help and wholeness as we pursue the kingdom of God together.

Even here within our own community, we're facing so many feelings: those who are ecstatic with this week's results, those who mourn deeply, and many who are confused about what will happen next. And we do need to be sensitive to the reality that there are those among us who are truly fearful: fearful for themselves, for their families, and for their dear friends.

By awakening to the truth of our brokenness, we can begin to step forward in hope, living into the spirit of Christ's healing love and reconciliation. For we are one people in Christ. We the baptized — who have been received into the household of God, who confess the faith of Christ crucified, who proclaim his resurrection, and share in his eternal priesthood — we are asked not only to recall but to live into the greatest commandment: to love our God with all our heart and all our soul and with all our mind, and with all our strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves. This great commandment is our guiding light, illuminating how we should live our lives: our home life, our common life, our lives within the broader community, and in the world.

What can we do in our own uncertain times? First, we can stand together as Christ's own and pray.

- We can and should pray daily for Donald, our President-elect, that he and all our elected leaders would faithfully serve in their offices, and be given courage, wisdom, and foresight to provide for the needs of all our people, and to fulfill our obligations in the community of nations.
- We can pray for ourselves and one another, for patience, compassion, and understanding, and for Christ's love to break down whatever divisions may separate us, so that we can recognize one another as beloved children of God.

And we can act, for God's justice does make demands on us — on our attitudes and actions, right where we are:

- We can bear witness to the reality that all of humanity is beloved of God and that we are most fully human, when we are in touch with our own weaknesses and the weaknesses and needs of our neighbors.
- We can testify, in word and deed, of God's deep desire for justice for all people, across our nation and the world.
- And we can continue to work together as a community to discover new ways to live into Christ's holy work of reconciliation and healing.

About 500 years ago, Martin Luther said, “Live as if Jesus was crucified yesterday, rose from the dead today, and is returning tomorrow.” What a life-giving way to live! Let me say this again. “Live as if Jesus was crucified yesterday, rose from the dead today, and is returning tomorrow.”

For as we come to know Who truly holds the future, we also know Who holds the present. Jesus is with us, strengthening us and encouraging us, to live into the truth of his Word, by loving God and loving our neighbor. In Christ, there is great hope and together we can seek to serve our Almighty God, by learning to love like Jesus. *Amen.*