

Luke 21:5-19

Upon hearing this gospel text from Luke it sounds as though what is taking place in the gospel could be thought to be a warning about the end times, or an eschatological writing. And a lot of what is written here sounds as though it could be a warning about what is taking place in our world right now. But you may know through study of the book of Luke, or through previous sermons you have heard on this gospel text, this writing is about the downfall of Jerusalem which happened prior to the gospel of Luke being written. This text is an affirmation that the people have been through terrible experiences and have survived. We are assured that God is with us here, now, with all that is going on.

I heard of a group of theological students who were studying the gospel of Luke, Chapter 21. They were in the seminary gym when the custodian walked by, and they thought they would have a little fun with him. They told him the eschatological passage they were studying and wondered if he could help with the interpretation. The old man looked at the passage of scripture, and then without hesitation he gave them an answer. He said the passage said, "God wins!"

The entire Bible is the story of God with us. How God has been with us from the beginning when he created Adam and Eve and they walked in the garden, how God stayed with the people as they turned away, how God tried to warn the people through the prophets, how God rescued the people from their suffering, how God sent his only son to earth to learn more about humanity and for humanity to learn more about God. The story is seemingly unchanging. God love us. We turn away from God and God seeks after us, drawing us back. Yet there are always those who do not turn away from God. There is always a faithful remnant, those who cling to God and stay the course, putting one foot in front of the other, stepping out in faith, even when it seems that the world's challenges, lies, chaos and storms will overtake them, and they are tempted to follow the world's ways, they remember that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.

Jesus recognizes, both in today's reading and now, that life will be filled with challenges, lies, chaos, and storms. The course will be rough, rocky, and turbulent. Staying loyal to Jesus will always be the unpopular decision, even the dangerous decision. But Jesus assures his disciples that their trust, faith, and loyalty will secure them in the end, if they will just stay the course.

That is what it's like for Christians navigating a world today filled with deceptions, distractions, and lies. You will inevitably be tempted to give up. You may imagine you see your path only to be faced with yet another false image. But trust Jesus to be your guide, and he will lead you through.

We Christians need to trust in our that faith that allows us to walk forward with our eyes closed and our sight clear. Faith is not seeing the path in front of us. Faith is trusting that the path will be there when we dare to take our first steps. Faith lets us know that truth is not something we see, something we've built, something tangible, or something sure. Faith is knowing that Jesus is there. Trusting in his presence, even when things get rough.

When John and Julia asked their friends to join them on a rafting trip down the rapids, they all wore their waterproof inflatable vests, took provisions, and learned the greatest rule of whitewater rafting: never let go of the raft. No matter what happens, no matter how rough it gets, no matter how inviting the shoreline looks or how easy it seems to jump off, never let go of the raft. Stay the course. The only way to survive is to stay the course.

They hit the rocks. The raft began to weave and pitch from one side to another. Thrown between the rapids, they approached the waterfall with fear and trepidation. While fear gripped them and they longed to jump out, the voice of the coach stayed in their heads. “No matter what happens, never let go of the raft.” “Keep your eyes ahead.” “Focus on the path.” “Stay the course.”

Down they went. For a moment, it felt like the raft was flying aimlessly through the air. They gripped the sides of the raft, closed their eyes, and then felt the impact as the raft plunged into the cascade. Down they slid fast and furiously. Then at last, they were streaming down river toward their destination.

Sometimes the world can feel as chaotic and frightening as that rafting trip. Sometimes, we can feel that there must be an easier way. Sometimes we would like to believe those voices that tell us, they know the way, the answer, the future. That they are sure of their rules, their readings, their view.

In those times, remember Jesus’ voice, saying, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Hear my voice. Follow my lead. Proclaim my message. Keep your eyes on me. Testify to my truth. Hold on tight. Never let go.”

Yet it can be easy to be deceived. I’ve been listening to a podcast about Jim Jones... you know the one who led the people to Guiana where they committed mass suicide. It is amazing how he was able to manipulate people. He faked miracle healings in a way that they seemed real. He had people passionately declaring they were cured from cancer when they never were diagnosed with cancer. What was real about Jones was that he was passionately committed to civil rights—during the 1960s, he helped integrate churches, hospitals, restaurants, and movie theaters, and he personally adopted several children of color. His followers were warm caring people who truly wanted to do what was right. Yet they were following a madman into their own destruction.

I read an article from one of his followers who was able to escape (Jennie Rothenberg Gritz. 2011. Drinking the Kool-Aid: A Survivor Remembers Jim Jones. The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/11/drinking-the-kool-aid-a-survivor-remembers-jim-jones/248723/?utm_source=email&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=share). She said that he was very smooth and offered everyone exactly what they wanted. By the time the people realized he was a fake they were in too far to escape. There were early signs that he was a fake, yet he told people what they wanted to hear so they ignored the signs. What Jonestown has taught us is that we can never be so complacent that we totally trust a person who seems too good to be true. And with that statement you may think, “Then should I trust Jesus? He was totally good.” The reason we know we can trust Jesus is that he was fully human, and he was also fully God. Jesus was God incarnate; God clothed in human skin.

Unlike false prophets Jesus will never lied to us. He spoke in parables that may be difficult to decipher but he never promised anything he couldn’t follow through on. His miracles were real. His mission was based on John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” and the following verse 17 “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.” No matter what the world gives us we need to hang on tight to Jesus, knowing that in the end God wins.

All glory be to God.