

¹⁷ For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.

¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.

¹⁹ I will rejoice in Jerusalem,
and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,
or the cry of distress.

²⁰ No more shall there be in it
an infant that lives but a few days,
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.

²¹ They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

²² They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat;
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

²³ They shall not labor in vain,
or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord —
and their descendants as well.

²⁴ Before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear.

²⁵ The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!
They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

Luke 21:5-19

⁵When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, ⁶“As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

⁷They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” ⁸And he said, “Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them.

⁹“When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.” ¹⁰Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; ¹¹there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

¹²“But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. ¹³This will give you an opportunity to testify. ¹⁴So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; ¹⁵for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. ¹⁶You will be betrayed even by parents and siblings, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. ¹⁷You will be hated by all because of my name. ¹⁸But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹By your endurance you will gain your souls.

I believe I speak for people on both sides of the political divide in our country: These feel like pretty dark days, even “end times”. The backdrop to all of this is the story of our fabled democracy and a desire to be made great. The idea and ideals of our democracy are beautiful things to ponder. Very similar to the vision of the temple in today’s reading from Luke. It was a magnificent structure, a temple honoring God, the Creator; greatly to be praised. But Jesus knew the fuller picture; the reality on the ground of how the temple did not always serve all of God’s people. Jesus knew, too, the temporal nature of such buildings and institutions. “The days will come when no one stone will be left upon the other,” Jesus said. He then riffs on this idea, warning of wars, insurrections, nation against nation; earthquakes, fires, famines. Many read into this Jesus foretelling the destruction of the temple by the Romans; a destruction that sent Jewish leaders into exile, into the diaspora, into deep darkness.

We can draw parallels to our time. Like the world in Jesus’s day, we, too, find ourselves in dark times. People worry about the destruction of their way of life. This darkness is not unique for us today or Jesus 2,000 years ago. The world lives constantly in dark times. Granted

some times are darker than other. These days feel especially dark. What is important is how we face the darkness we are feeling.

We can imagine we are in mortal combat; that the growing darkness is threatening to kill us; to bury us. This image is the darkness of the tomb. Valarie Kaur, founder of the Revolutionary Love Project, suggests we might see our present darkness as that of the womb, where the fear and pain of childbirth, with the help of deep breathing and hard pushing, brings forth new life. Barbara Brown Taylor put it this way: “New life starts in the dark. Whether it is the seed in the ground, the baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb.”

As said earlier, many people read this passage from Luke as Jesus warning people about the coming destruction of the temple, but perhaps Jesus had something else in mind, given that much of what Jesus warns about has happened multiple times since the temple’s destruction.

When all these “signs” come about, Jesus assumes people, like us, will speak publicly about what is harming God’s creation, what is causing the darkness, and such talk will probably land one in jail. “They will hand you over to synagogues and prisons,” Jesus said, “and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name.” It is in those times, Jesus says, we will be given “an opportunity to testify.”

I firmly believe it is up to us if our present darkness is to be the birthing of new life, the womb. We are the hands, eyes, ears, heart of God in this world. William Sloane Coffin, a colleague and a prophet said: “The prophet’s job is to proclaim ‘Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.’ Our job is to figure out the plumbing.”

Jesus said, “This will give you an opportunity to testify.” Are we doing this? Are any of us in danger of being jailed or killed, because we testify in Jesus’s name against this present darkness?

I would argue that this passage from Luke, given to be read as we near the end of another liturgical church year, is not about end times, rather about how we are to live life in the midst of dark, destructive times. We are to speak up, in Jesus’s name, and proclaim God’s will.

What is God’s will? What are we to speak?

Isaiah lays it out, when he quotes God: “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth.” And here is what that the new earth is to look like:

- “no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress” – **adequate income**

- “No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime” – **adequate health care**
- “They shall build houses and inhabit them” – **adequate housing**
- “they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit” – **adequate food**
- “They shall not labor in vain” – **fairness for migrant workers**
- “They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain” – **violence against the Other is eliminated**

Jesus was deeply immersed in his faith; he knew and strove to embody the promises of God, make known by the words of the prophets. I truly believe, when Jesus said we will have “an opportunity to testify”, he was calling us to speak to and act on the words of the prophets like Isaiah.

We must stand up and speak against all that hurts or destroys. We, you and I in this church and in this place, are charged to be the voice and hands and ears and heart of God in this world. “Our job is to figure out the plumbing,” whatever the cost.

Jesus went to the cross, speaking up for God’s vision, living out God’s love. He was buried in darkness; his followers dwelt in a land of deep darkness. But that very tomb proved to be the womb of new life.

Next Sunday may be the end of the liturgical church year, but it is not the end of life. But only if we step up in Jesus’ name, testify to the power of love – love for all of creation – air, land, water, plants, animals, and people; love especially for those different from ourselves and those whose opinions differ from our own.

God has promised to “create new heavens and a new earth”. For this to happen we have to believe, to trust in God’s vision and live into it by standing up and testifying with our voices and our bodies.

May God bless us with the strength, courage, and patience we will need to birth “new heavens and a new earth” in this present darkness. Amen.