

Message Delivered at Christ Church
April 9th & 10th, 2011
TEXT: Luke 21:5-19, 25-33 The Big Read
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

So I went to undergraduate school in a place they call Tobacco Road, where they fancy themselves to be the locus of all things college basketball...three teams down there that have been pretty good over the years: Duke and NC State and UNC. But we all know that Richmond is now the college basketball capital of the world! We got two Division I teams here...one made it to the Sweet Sixteen, and the other to the Final Four. That was a lot of fun, and great for this city...

Now there's a speech that every basketball coach has in their hip pocket. Doesn't make a difference whether one is coaching women or men; and the younger and newer and greener the players, the more likely the coach will include this speech in their repertoire. It's not used at every game...it's pretty much a "big game" speech. And actually, it's mostly used in highly specific situations...often at half-time, and usually when the team has a lead—often a big lead—against a dangerous opponent...like when VCU was up fourteen against Kansas at the break a couple weeks ago.

Now I don't know for sure...and I actually briefly met Shaka Smart Saturday morning, but didn't have the chance to ask him about it specifically...but my hunch is that at halftime of that game, Coach Smart said something like this to the Ram players: "Sometime during what happens next, they're going to make a run. They're going to hit some shots; make some steals; get some calls...but something's going to happen. You're up by fourteen, but they're powerful, and you won't stay up by fourteen. So be ready; and when that happens, don't panic, keep your cool. Keep playing. You got what you need, and it will take you to the end."

It's a basketball version of a speech we've all heard at least once in our life...maybe a long time ago, and possibly from a parent. "Life is difficult; there will be challenges; sometimes things go smoothly, but in everybody's life some rain must fall. When that happens, remember you'll be okay; persevere; I'm always in your corner, and got your back."

It's a myth life is easy; that the structures in the world and in our own lives won't have a few stones knocked out of them from time to time. If we're fortunate, we've been warned that there'll be some knocking around along the way so we can be alert, and not taken by surprise, and ready, and be open to encouragement and receiving some strength to persevere.

So there are places we go to in scripture for comfort; and there are places to go to hear easy words. This bewildering lesson from Jesus today is probably not on either of those lists.

He's in Jerusalem, and standing in the Temple. The cross is what's next. So before the drama of the Passion...before all that happens...he says what we heard today.

Now, this portion of the gospel story has a name. It's called "the Little Apocalypse." It's called "little" because it's short. And it's called "apocalypse" because that's what it is...an apocalyptic message.

Now we've heard that word before. Every movie ever made about the end of the world—whether the cause is nuclear destruction, or an uncontrollable virus, or a natural disaster, or an invasion of aliens or zombies—is described by movie reviewers as "apocalyptic."

We use the word a lot. But what the word really means is “revelation.” That’s what the word “apocalypse” means: “revelation.” An apocalyptic word is a revealing word.

You find apocalyptic writing throughout the scriptures. The best example is the last book of the New Testament...the Revelation to John. But there’s apocalyptic writing in the prophets, as well. And this word today is the apocalyptic vision of Jesus.

It is not, admittedly, a whole bunch of happy words; and if we’re a bit mystified after hearing it, I think we’re supposed to be. It’s meant to be secretive. It’s meant to be imprecise. It’s poetry more than prose, and poetry is never direct.

And Jesus said it. What Jesus says here is found not only in Luke, but also in Matthew and Mark. In each case, it takes up almost a chapter of each gospel. So it might be called the Little Apocalypse, but it takes up a fair hunk of the story.

So our first scriptural word for today is “apocalyptic.” Our second is “eschaton.” It comes from a Greek word for “last, or final.” It’s a word that refers to what are sometimes called “the End Times.” But not just any old kind of end times, but the end times God intends; the end times brought about by God. All the “Left Behind” books, for example, are an interpretation of the eschaton. And the eschaton is often the subject of apocalyptic words and writing.

Apocalyptic words often have to do with the end of things...like here in these words from Jesus. Sort of...

You know, hope is sometimes hard to come by. Things happen. We get lost; we get behind; we take some hits. Stone upon stone gets torn out of our lives. We don’t go hungry, and for only a few of us now are our lives disrupted by war or insurrections. But we had a death in this congregation this week; and a friend of mine passed away this week; and so we lose loved ones, and we suffer disappointments, and dreams go by the wayside. Our relationships, or our careers, or our net worth, or our health isn’t what we thought it would be. Things change, and we don’t understand why or how to come along. We sometimes look at where we are now, and wonder if this is as good as it gets and are perplexed when the myth that life should be easy and pleasant is proven to be just a myth. Sometimes, it’s that way.

And the point of apocalyptic words isn’t to give the details about the how, and what, and when, and where of how everything is going to end. Elsewhere Jesus says that that’s a pretty fruitless conversation because no one will know the time. I’m reminded of the Peanuts character who says “Don’t worry whether the world is coming to an end today because in Australia it’s already tomorrow.”

Their point—and I’m just doing some pretty direct Bible talk today--is to remind the people of God...especially those who’ve got their backs against the wall...of the more important truth that there is more to all this than what meets the eye, that there is cause for hope, and God is with them and will prevail. That despite what we see, God is busy behind the scenes to bring a good end to the story.

It works a little bit this way...every once in a while when I’m reading a book or watching a movie, I’ll skip ahead and read the ending. You see, every once in a while, when the tension gets too great or the story gets too intense, I need to just jump to the end to find out for sure that the good guy wins. I got to skip some of the story, just to be assured that it’s going to be okay. Now I’ll go back and read the rest of the story. But if it gets dark, I want some hope. So I jump to the end to get a peak behind the veil and be assured that it will end up all right.

And that’s what Jesus is doing here; lifting the veil of the end of the story in poetic language and imagery that is both imprecise and secretive to assure those in the middle of the story that God will prevail...and to provide a word of direction, encouragement, and

perseverance, and hope. It won't always be easy. The powers of darkness will make a run. There will be wars, insurrections, earthquakes, disease, famine...nation will fight nation, families may get torn apart. Much of it will be beyond human control. It's gonna happen. When it does, Jesus says...don't panic; keep your cool; you'll be given what you need to come through to the other side; and when it's like all this, it is your time to shine.

Now that does not make what Jesus says here particularly sweet. That there will be wars, and insurrections, and nation fighting nation, and great earthquakes, and famines and plagues makes us all a bit nervous. We kind of wonder what he's talking about. When I read this passage out loud to someone this week, they interrupted and only half-jokingly said "Sounds like the evening news."

Precisely.

A war in Afghanistan; an insurrection in Libya; an earthquake in Japan; and 6 million children die from hunger every year. That's just children. Thirty-five women here this week because in one of the wealthiest nations in the world they have no place to live.

But if you ever do the "this date in history" on the internet, you'll see that Monday is the anniversary of the beginning of the Spanish-American War. On April 16, 1917 Vladimir Lenin arrived in Moscow to help the insurrection along. And 150 years ago this week, shots were fired at Fort Sumter and our great national agony began. We've often tended to put these words of Jesus into the future or try to associate them with a definite moment and cry out "the time is near." That's why sales of Tim LaHayes' novels sky-rocketed after 9/11. People thought this might be it.

But maybe Jesus is just saying an eternally contemporary truth about how human beings have always chosen to live. I happen to be one who believes history has seen incredible progress in the way human beings treat one another. But we're not beyond creating the scenario Jesus describes here.

Which means that now is a pretty good time to be reminded that there is nothing to fear; that we will be given what we need; that there is a testimony to give; and redemption is already among us; and that there is a deep reason to hope. Because God is at work, and deeply busy behind the scenes.

You know, this week it was our pleasure to be in relationship with some new friends for whom hope is a precious commodity. Some of our CARITAS friends know great peace, but they've taken their hits in life; sometimes, some pretty horrendous ones. And they're no different from us... some smile a lot, some don't; some are talkative, some are quiet; some arrive where they are supposed to be early, some arrive late. But spend some time with these friends and you'll see the hope. The fruit of this congregation's ministry of hospitality...and hospitality is a ministry the power of which we tend to underestimate...is the witness of the hope and the faith of which Jesus speaks; that the story ends well; and whether we're up at halftime or not, God wins the game.

So the trials and tribulations will come. In some cases for some of us, they're already here and we're in the midst of them. Most of us, at some point in our lives, have times when it's difficult to get out of bed. But one more time in the Gospel According to Luke...and we've heard this a lot...we do not need to fear; there is an opportunity to testify; we'll be given the words to say and the strength to do great things; our redemption draweth nigh; and not a single one of these beautiful words we've heard Jesus say in Luke's Gospel of grace will pass away. Not a one. They are all eternal.

I don't know what kind of week it's been for you. But if it's been one where the stones have been shaking, and the earth quaking, and where there's been way too much fighting...if it's been one of those kinds of weeks we all have from time to time...let me boil Jesus' apocalyptic vision down to a few simple words: It's going to be okay. Because behind all the imagery, and behind the veil of what we see with our own eyes, that's the truth of the end of the story.