

# In Life and In Death, We Belong to God

**TEXT:**  
**Luke 21:5-19**

November 18, 2007

**W**ars and rumors of war, earthquakes, plagues and famine: Our reading this morning from the Gospel of Luke could have been taken from the teleprompter of the evening's news. The events identified in this passage were as frightening to people in the time of Jesus as they are for us today. Like them, we often seek meaning in these events as signs of the time or of the age to come.

At the turn of the first millennium, the churches of Europe were packed with anxious believers who were convinced that the world was coming to an end. In the 1870's there were many groups looking for signs of the second coming of Jesus. One of those groups included John Kellogg who invented a new light cereal that would not weigh down the believers at the time of the rapture. With each new global war of our age, preachers would look to passages like this and try to make the case that this war is the one that signals the impending end. Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHay have made millions spinning fictional versions of the second coming.

Many Christians are fascinated by these texts forecasting the end of the age. These texts reflect a long and important tradition in the Bible. The Hebrew Scriptures spoke often of the

coming day of the Lord, and the Christian tradition followed suit. When the present looked bleak, when the people were facing exile, persecution and war, the prophets would look toward the Lord's victory over the enemies.

That is the case in our story this morning. Jesus and his disciples have come to Jerusalem. As they walked around the temple grounds, they saw the magnificent building, probably the most impressive structure they would see in their lifetime. The disciples were amazed at the size of the huge stones that made up the foundations of the temple. But Jesus stopped beside one of the stones that was taller than himself, and said, even these stones will one day be overturned. To his followers, this is unimaginable. Jesus then spoke of other signs, the wars and natural catastrophes that are coming. During all of these things, he said, be faithful, be strong.

This text is a text of the early church. It was written many decades after the death of Jesus and after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. In that year, the Romans came into Jerusalem and destroyed the city, including the magnificent Temple, the heart of the spiritual life of the Jews. In the years that followed the fall of Jerusalem, the followers of Jesus faced persecution and even death because of their faith in Jesus. Their key leaders were all dead, Peter, Paul and James, the

brother of Jesus. Those were very bleak days.

And yet, this is a text of great hope. When faced with the hardship of life, there is always a source for your strength and steadfastness. Jesus said, "even if you die, you will not be harmed. By your endurance you will gain your soul." [Luke 21:16-19]

This is what the texts of the apocalypse are all about: hope. In the face of desperate times, hardship and persecution, these texts told people that there is a hopeful conclusion ahead. God is present with you when the road is not easy. God will be involved in building a new future.

Let me take a different approach to illustrate the meaning of this hard-to-interpret topic. A week ago, I was in New York, serving as a delegate for the Presbyterian Church to the General Assembly for the National Council of Churches and Church World Services.<sup>1</sup> For our final worship service we traveled to St. Vartan Armenian Orthodox Cathedral in Manhattan, just a few blocks from the United Nations building. The cathedral was named after one of the martyrs of the Armenian faith who was killed by hostile Arab neighbors in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. We had come to the cathedral for the installation of the incoming President of the Council, Archbishop Vicken Aykazian of

the Armenian Church of America. It was a truly remarkable service of worship.

It began with an impressive and solemn processional, lead by His Beatitude Herman, Metropolitan of all Orthodox Churches in America and Canada, and followed by His Eminence, Archbishop Karin, the Primate of the Syrian Orthodox Church, and other distinguished members of the Orthodox tradition. The Cathedral was filled with incense and lit by many candles. The choir sang a chorus of Armenian chants. The liturgy of the service was low-key and the speaking style very deliberate, but the overwhelming message was a powerful statement of the unity of Christ's Church.

At one point in the service, Dr. Michael Kinnemon, the General Secretary of the Council, shared a story of a conversation he had with a member of his home congregation in St. Louis. He mentioned that he was going to New York to participate in the installation of the new President of the Council, who happened to be an Archbishop in the Armenian Church of America. The other member said, "Hmmm, I've never heard of them. Is that some kind of new church?"

Quite the contrary, the Armenian Church is one of the old churches in Christianity. In the year 301 AD, Armenia became the first nation to adopt Christianity as its official religion. The sanctuary of St. Vartan Cathedral in New York, which was built the same year as our own sanctuary, is modeled after the great Armenian Cathedral Holy Etchmiadzin, which was built in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and is still in active use

and is the spiritual heart of the Armenian Church world wide.

As the service drew to a close, I found myself wiping a tear from my eye as I observed the enormous pride that the members of that congregation had that one of their own had been elevated to the position of President of America's National Council of Churches. In a church made up primarily of immigrants and their children, and who still conducts their worship in the native tongue of Armenia, it was a one of the most significant moments in their history.

Here was a group of people who had suffered persecution in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, and then were confronted by the rise of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>. Even into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they faced genocide of over one million of their people. Now, into the opening decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the church is still here, it is still thriving, and one of its own is the President of the National Council of Churches. What has kept them going through the difficult and discouraging years? It was the hope of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, it was the rich tradition and practice of their faith developed over 1700 years, it was the promise that God would be with them and that they would endure and gain their soul.

This is part of the meaning of the complicated and uncomfortable text we read from Luke this morning. This is part of the meaning of the great word of hope and renewal from the Prophet Isaiah. It is the message that lies at the heart of the scriptures. What we hear is that God is present and active in the

life of the people of God. No matter what we face, we know that we can endure all things because God is with us. God is renewing the church as it faces hardship, set-backs, persecution and even the calamities of modern life.

This is the message of the apocalypse; this is what we mean when we talk about Christ's return. We need not get caught up in the details of the promised second coming of Jesus Christ. What is important, what is being said in these texts about the coming day of the Lord, is this: in whatever comes in our lives, we rest assured that God is with us. And so, in the end, we learn from our sisters and brothers in the rich history of 1700 years of the Armenian Church, and we proclaim with the people of God throughout the centuries and with Christians of every age, that "In life and in death, we belong to God."

**This sermon delivered by  
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<sup>i</sup> The National Council of Churches is a community of faith traditions expressing the ecumenical unity of Christ's Church in the United States. There are 37 denominations that make up the Council.