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# “It’s the End of the World as We Know It, and I Feel Fine”

A SERMON on Luke 21:5-19 for the 33<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C  
Preached 13 November 2022 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister<sup>1</sup>  
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Imagine, if you will, that the end of the world as we know it were to come, and the only ones to make it through to the other side were... the high school students. Whatever weapon it was that fell from the skies contained a chemical agent, turning any survivors over the age of about 18 into mindless flesh-eating zombies. All that’s left, vying for control of the desolate landscape, are the various tribes that had previously roamed the halls of the local high school. Where would you ‘fit in’ in such a future?

Would you be among the “Jocks,” a warrior tribe clothed in armour, ruthless in competitiveness... and still not quite sure whether they should accept the golf team guys as a true part of the tribe? Or maybe, instead, the computer nerds: clad in black turtlenecks and non-descript jeans, *seemingly* innocuous but worthy of a bit of suspicion that they might be “up to something.” In the brave new world we’re imagining, the cheerleaders have transformed themselves into a fierce band of feminist Amazonian warriors, the Cheermazons, ready to finally assert some womanly domination—would that be your place? Or perhaps you’re the new kid from Canada, still left out and all on your own, and simply trying to reunite with your girlfriend.

Well, any of you who have Netflix can explore these possibilities—and several others—as you binge-watch one of their television series from just a few years back, a comedy-drama entitled *Daybreak*. *Daybreak* takes certain inspiration from that now-classic movie *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*. Matthew Broderick even returns to the screen in *Daybreak*, this time as the *principal* rather than the high school slacker.

As I watched episodes of this series back when it first came out, it was interesting—and perhaps a bit of scary—to think that somehow, amidst everything else about the world as we know it that got destroyed, nevertheless the seemingly omnipresent *cliques* of teenage life in North America still survived. No functioning adults, limited food supplies, no running water, no signs of government or military or any other kind of civic infrastructure, and yet the dividing lines between the tribes... still there. In fact, rather than the apocalypse bringing everyone together, unifying them in a common cause to defeat the threatening realities and rebuild a new world, the after-world imagined by *Daybreak* for the most part *reinforces* and *strengthens* the tribal resolve. (There are, I will admit, a few exceptions to this, which make the story all-the-more interesting, but for more about *that*, you’ll have to watch the series.)

A television series like *Daybreak* is simply one recent example of a long, long, *long* line of human imaginings of what the so-called “end of the world” will be like—how it would come about, what would happen, what might come of humanity and the earth afterwards. War, aliens,

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon is a revision of a sermon on this text that I preached on 17 November 2019 at the Storrs Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, in Storrs, Connecticut. That sermon, in turn, incorporated material adapted from a sermon on this passage delivered on 13 November 2016 by the Rev. Adam Yates at St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, East Haddam, Connecticut; used by permission.

natural disasters, failures of modern technology, space objects impacting the earth—dozens, if not hundreds, of apocalyptic scenarios have been spun out for each of these possible causes. *Night of the Living Dead, The Time Machine, Armageddon, The Book of Eli, War of the Worlds, Cat's Cradle...* the list of literary and cinematic explorations of apocalypse over the last 100 or 150 years could go on and on. In some of these, humanity is brought together by what we face, as a common threat calls forth from us our greatest cooperation and highest achievements. In others, however, we seem simply to *de*volve to even-more-bad versions of what we already are.

And it's not just been over this last century or two, either. Imagining what might come at, and after, the end of all things goes back much further, of course. It seems to be an almost universal human curiosity. What happens after *this*: this life, this world, this present reality?

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As you might guess, this curiosity and these imaginings pop up a number of times in our biblical scriptures, too. There's an important difference, though, between some of the apocalyptic books and movies we know from our times and much of what the Bible has to say about the so-called "end of the world." You see, one of the tricky things about reading apocalyptic texts in our Bible is that most, if not all of them, get written *after* the event they seem to predict has happened. They are not predictions of things to come in the far-off future of the reader. They are the remembered stories told to help make sense and meaning out of a calamity that is currently unfolding or has recently unfolded.

The Gospel of Luke, which we've been walking through for much of the past 5 months or so, was most likely composed sometime between the years 80 and 100 AD. It was in the year 70 AD that the forces of the Roman Empire laid siege to Jerusalem and ultimately destroyed the Temple there. This was an event that *rocked* the Jewish tradition, and by extension, the early Christian communities. The centre of religious identity had been destroyed. The repository of tradition, knowledge, and sacred objects had been lost. The biggest, boldest, seemingly most unshakeable symbol of God's presence that they were capable of imagining was gone.

In the wake of that reality, Jewish and Christian communities all over the empire lived in uncertainty and fear of further persecution from the authorities. They lived with the anxious knowledge that at any moment their neighbours, their friends, even their own families could turn them over to the powers that be. They lived with the dread knowledge that imprisonment, torture, and even death were real possibilities, hanging over their heads like a sword.

It is into this reality that the author of Luke writes. Into this world of fear, anxiety, and dread, the author remembers this encounter, this saying of Jesus, that we've heard in our scripture reading this morning, and shares it as a source of strength. To this community left to grapple with the rubble of the destroyed temple—both the physical rubble and the ruins of what they carried in their hearts and minds—Jesus' words are a reassurance amidst the real uncertainties of their lives.

"Do you see this great temple?" Jesus asks. "The day will come when not one stone will be left standing on another," his words echoing down through the years to a scared community of his followers, huddled together around a table in someone's home, as they broke bread together.

"The day will come when you will be persecuted and arrested. The day will come when

your family and friends betray you, and you will be handed over, and they will put some of you to death. The day will come when you will be hated because of my name,” Jesus warned.

“But do not let yourselves be distracted and do not let yourselves be led astray,” he continued. “For though you may die, you shall not perish, and if you endure, something far greater awaits you.”

Now, admittedly, this may not sound all that comforting. I mean, let’s be clear here: Jesus does *not* promise that his followers will be without struggle, or pain, or suffering. What Jesus *does* promise is that there is *another possibility* at work. It is the promise that the present trajectory of things is not immutable. It is the promise that perhaps in the apocalypse a continuation of the current state of affairs is *not* the only thing that might happen. After all, as the author and noted religious scholar Reza Aslan has said, “It is the job of the historian to say what is likely, and of faith to say what is possible.”

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Humans are remarkably predictable, and we have thousands of years of human behaviour to draw upon as we look at the future that is before us. What’s more, we are imperfect and broken in many varied, but consistent, ways. What do I mean by that? When presented with the same opportunities, it sure does seem like we make the same mistakes over and over again. There is no new sin in creation, just the same old sins in a repeating loop, it so often seems.

When times are good, we neglect the poor and we despise the needy. We deafen our ears to the plights of the suffering, and we blind our eyes to the injustices acted out in our midst. When times are bad, we isolate ourselves and lash out in our fear against those who are different. We make scapegoats of the foreigner, the one who is different from ourselves, the person who cannot defend themselves. When times are bad, it is dangerous to be the person labelled “other.”

It is true in our own day. It was true in Jesus’ day. It has been true in every era of human history. The community for whom the Gospel of Luke was written—they knew that it was true, too. They knew the reality of the world in which they lived. They knew what was *likely* in the future that lay before them.

The good news that this community received, however, is that the *likely* outcome is *not* the only possibility. And so it is for us, too: the good news we receive today as this ancient witness speaks into our present lives is that there is still yet another possibility in play. Like Jesus’ first disciples and followers, like the original hearers of the gospel of Luke some 50 or 60 years later, the voice of Jesus urges us, today, now, to remain true and to endure, in the midst of the calamities we face, because there is still yet another possibility at hand.

Do not be distracted by human fear, my friends, for in Christ there is a new possibility. Do not be distracted by portents of war and destruction, my friends, for in Christ there is a new possibility. Do not be distracted by hatred or by racism, by xenophobia or homophobia, by persecution or by insult, my friends, for in Christ there is a new possibility.

And what is that new possibility? It is the possibility of our brokenness healed and our very selves made whole. It is the possibility of redemption and transformation. It is the possibility of new creation, of God’s Kingdom coming near to us.

What must we do to find the new possibility before us? We must endure. Moreover, we must trust in Christ.

But trusting in Christ does not mean we get to lean back and take a nap. It does not mean we get to check out and go on long, brisk walks in the woods. It does not mean that we get to turn our backs on the world and lose ourselves in our gardens, or in a good book, or in developing opinions about craft-brewed beer<sup>2</sup>. I mean, believe you me, in the midst of all that's been going on in our world in recent times, I know I've felt the temptation—or even an outright *yearning*—to simply go bury my head in the sand. But trusting in Christ, my friends, does not mean contenting ourselves in idleness with the expectation that God will do our work for us. That is not *trust*; that is *hopelessness*. That is *despair*. That is the *absence* of faith.

Endurance is not passive; it requires effort, it is active. Trusting in Christ does not abdicate us of responsibility. Trusting in Christ gives us the courage and confidence to stand up to the brokenness and sin of our world. It gives us the courage to oppose hatred and oppression wherever it is found. It gives us the courage to overcome fear and isolation. It gives us courage to reach across division and offer healing to society's wounds. It gives us courage to look at one another face to face and eye to eye until we can see that it is the same breath that animates us, the same spirit that fills our lungs, for we are all children of God.

The first Christian communities did not shrink away from the world. They did not hide beneath their beds in fear, or settle only for prayer made in quiet escapes from reality. They stood boldly in the face of uncertainty and persecution... and fed the poor, cared for the sick, clothed the naked, and visited the prisoner. They stood firm before betrayal and even death, proclaiming boldly the Gospel message, the good news, that there *is* a new possibility for all of creation.

Despair is easy, you see. Numbness, exhaustion, dismay and disinterest, even complacency—these things are easy. But in Christ, God calls us not to the easy path, but rather the path that leads to actual and true life. “It’s precisely now,” one good soul has written, “now when the world around us feels the most apocalyptic, that we have to respond with resilience, courage, and truthful unflinching witness. It’s precisely now, when systemic evil and age old brokenness threaten to bring us to ruin that we have to testify without fear and without shame to the Good News that is the Gospel. What’s happening is not death, but birth. Yes, the birth pangs hurt. They hurt so appallingly much. But God is our midwife, and what God births will never lead to desolation. Yes, we are called to bear witness in the ruins, but rest assured: these birth pangs will end in joy. By our endurance, we will gain our souls.”<sup>3</sup>

So may it be.

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<sup>2</sup> “Trump Voters Will Not Like What Happens Next,” Garrison Keillor, *The Washington Post*, November 9, 2016. [www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trump-voters-will-not-like-what-happens-next/2016/11/09/e346ffc2-a67f-11e6-8fc0-7be8f848c492\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trump-voters-will-not-like-what-happens-next/2016/11/09/e346ffc2-a67f-11e6-8fc0-7be8f848c492_story.html)

<sup>3</sup> Debie Thomas, “By Your Endurance,” *Journey With Jesus: A Weekly Webzine for the Global Church*, [journeywithjesus.net](http://journeywithjesus.net).