

Text: Luke 21:25-34

Title: Christ is near: A promise that is our hope

Objectives:

- To pay attention to endings in Biblical history and in our times (both collective and individual)
- To open up to trust, though we do not understand we are learning to trust that Christ comes near to us in the hardest of places – in the endings, transforming them into new beginnings.
- To explore what it means to hope against hope in the endings of our lives.

Through the written word,
and the spoken word,
may we know your Living Word
Jesus the Christ,
Amen

Introduction:

(Happy New Year! – Children's talk – The Advent Wreath where endings are beginning)

Today we find ourselves at the beginning – or is it the end?

Just as I was about to wish you Happy New Year - The Gospel reading seemed to take us to the **end** of the world – the apocalypse.

Perhaps we are at the **beginning** AND at the **end**.

Maybe beginnings and endings are two sides or perspectives of the same event, perhaps

- every ending is the context for a new beginning.

Let's look closer at Luke's gospel – settle in, we have a whole year of Luke ahead of us!

Luke is a masterful writer – he weaves historic notes, tender hearted human stories rich in emotion and relational connection into a beloved inclusive gospel.

And today we begin in chapter 21. Where the narrative shifts to first century science-fiction. Looking forward to a time yet to come – metaphorical language about the end of the world. Also known as “Apocalyptic language”. First Century Science Fiction.

What's interesting is that in Luke's writing: the apocalypse is mixed with what is really going on. Setting history somehow in the larger context of God's purpose, “historical descriptions laced with symbols, signs and mysterious figures of speech”.

(Craddock's commentary on Luke)

I call it Chicken Licken (or little) language...

“As chicken-licken (or chicken little) went one day to the woods, an acorn fell upon her poor bald head, and she thought the sky had fallen. Then she said she would go and tell the king that the sky had fallen.”

There was an acorn – not sure if there was a sky that was falling!
Reality intermingled with metaphorical language.

An event that seems like an end – is folded into THE end.

So what endings might Luke be alluding to? As he mixes the story of Jesus & the disciples with the end of the world?

- (1) The first possibility – is of the ending experienced by the disciples who lived and breathed and walked with Jesus...

Luke chapter 21 takes a turn from Jesus teachings and ministry to the beginning of the story of his death.

The disciples could not believe that their friend and Rabbi Jesus would die.

Luke 21 is the last chapter before the plot to kill Jesus and the last supper.

So even though this chapter might sound like the end of the world, the grand finale -
Maybe today's gospel is about endings and not "the" end.

For the disciples, Jesus death was possibly the end of their world.

Death of a beloved friend, of a dear family member is disorienting, it is an abrupt end to what we know, to patterns of living, to living, reciprocal love.

And end to the world we know and are familiar with.

- (2) The second possibility... is that Luke is referring to the end of Jerusalem and the Jewish Temple. 10 or 20 years before Luke wrote, Jerusalem was under siege by the Roman Army and in AD 70 the second temple destroyed.

The temple in Jerusalem was the centre point for Jewish culture and worship – especially in a time of Roman rule.

It was their identity; the place they would gather to remember who they were as a people in covenant with God. A God who had taken them out of Egypt, out of Babylon and given them land and made them into a great nation.

For these early Jewish Christians the Roman siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple was the end of their world.

I wonder how the people in Anchorage are experiencing the world as they know it, after Friday's earthquake.

One school student tweeted:

"I'm shaking and our teachers are keeping us under our tables and telling us there will be an after shocks maybe in 5 minutes, or tomorrow, we don't know," she tweeted. "I'm in the art classroom and everything is literally destroyed."

Everything is destroyed. The end of their world.

- (3) The third possibility is in the language of the apocalypse. It is high in symbolism and it speaks of the greatest destruction that could ever be – the end of the natural world – the end of what humans need to survive on earth. The sun, the moon and the stars; the roar of the seas.

Though this language is symbolic and not literal, it does cause us to sit up.

As it speaks profoundly to us in our age. We are witnessing the consequences of our human irresponsibility with the earth

- global warming,
- reduced water tables,
- poisoning of oceans and soil
- and the extinction of species.

Perhaps the third warning in our Gospel is a future warning - the end of the natural world.

So... this chapter in Luke's gospel with its highly symbolized apocalyptic language...

- casts our gaze backward to historical endings (to Christ's death or to the destruction of Jerusalem and her temple)
- and it casts our gaze forward to warn us of the extinctions and possible natural endings in our future...

BUT it does more than that.

it also calls us to how to live in the present.

To faithful discipleship and a hope that resists cynicism.

- Apocalyptic language is actually a dramatic witness to the tenacity of faith and hope among the people of God in the present.
- This description is "hope's response to the cynic who mocks the faithful by saying "where is the promise? Where is the coming One?"
- In the midst of disaster – faith turns its face toward God- not only for a word from God but also for a vision of the end of misery.

(Commentary by Luke Timothy Johnson on Luke)

So while this texts lures us to consider endings...

- Of relationships, careers, life roles, cultural roots... maybe life itself.

It also inserts into the ending... a promise.

A promise that is our hope.

Within the ending, within each ending – is the promise of the nearness of Christ.

At some point our world falls apart, life changes, or the lights go out.

More often than not we see this as the end.

When these things happen, Jesus says, remember the fig tree.

Read the signs correctly.

When its branch becomes tender and it puts forth leaves you know summer is near.

So also when the darkness overtakes your life trust that Christ is near.

“Hope is the risky business of calling for the coming of what we cannot see coming, of saying yes to the future, where nothing is guaranteed.

Hope dares to say come, dares to pray come, to what it cannot yet see coming.”

John Caputo Hope against Hope

It's a hope against all hopes – to trust that in the midst of chaos, Christ is near.

Rebecca Solnit, American writer, historian and activist has written two books:

Hope in the Dark and A Paradise Built in Hell.

In her writings she reflects on human hope in the midst of natural disasters.

Where hope is not some naïve optimism: that everything's going to be fine, and we can just sit back. But that its a sense of uncertainty, of coming to terms with the fact that we don't know what will happen and we have to let go of certainty, act in the moment and risk a new way.

She says in an interview:

“There's a way a disaster throws people into the present and gives them this supersaturated immediacy that also includes a deep sense of connection.

It's as though in some violent gift, you've been given a kind of spiritual awakening ... in a way that makes you feel more alive – a metaphysical sense of connection to the people you suddenly have something in common with”

(<https://onbeing.org/programs/rebecca-solnit-falling-together-dec2017/>)

She writes about the San Francisco - Oakland earthquake of April 18, 1906, which killed 3,000 people and annihilated the center of the city.

Dorothy Day was in Oakland. She's eight years old. She watches it and describes two phenomena - people falling apart, but also there's people falling together. And the question she asked was "Why can't we live this way all the time?"

Because within every seeming ending, Christ is near, perhaps in the very cloud itself.

The Spirit of Christ moving, connecting people, bring love, hope into the chaos.

I do not understand it, but I am learning to trust it.

I noticed it this week on a much smaller scale – as we transition our church office – Randy leaving and a permanent person still to hire – it's a little bit of chaos. The Spirit nudged me to reach out for help. And one email to the wardens and treasurer and the world feels ok again. I am held. And the anxiety diminishes – Christ is near.

The Advents of our lives asks us to trust the Coming One, more than the darkness.

- to receive the God who comes to us in our endings and beginnings. Christ is near.
- For that is our hope.

*To see Thee is the end and the beginning;
Thou carriest me and thou goest before:
Thou art the journey and the journey's end.*

Boethius, 480-525 CE

Amen