

Luke 21:25–36

21:25 "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.

21:26 People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

21:27 Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory.

21:28 Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

21:29 Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees;

21:30 as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near.

21:31 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

21:32 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.

21:33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

21:34 "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly,

21:35 like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth.

21:36 Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

You all know that I am not from around here. My accent has faded slightly since I've come north, but if you listen to me talk long enough it becomes clear that I did not grow up anywhere near here.

I was born and raised down South. I grew up with homemade signs on the roadside that said things like “repent, the kingdom of God is coming” or “Jesus will return soon to judge us all.” My friends often went to churches that preached that we were in the “end of days” and that the time was coming when the world would face an apocalypse and violent end times. All around us was the idea that a great final end to humanity was coming, and that Jesus was going to be bringing it with him.

For that reason, I always found that Christianity to be a little scary. I liked the churches my family went to a lot better. No one ever talked about the end of time, and the only Jesus I knew was one who brought peace and comfort. The other Christians were scary.

It’s those childhood fears of fundamentalists that get stirred up when I read passages like the one we have today. It’s never comfortable to read about destruction, and this passage is no exception. Here we have Jesus foreshadowing for his followers the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and, even more disturbingly, the end of the world as we know it.

Call it a text appropriate for Halloween. Here we are, looking towards Thanksgiving and for many of us the preparations for Christmas are well underway. This season, the fall and the lead up into Christmas, is actually my favorite time of year.

But as a kid, I really felt ambivalent about Halloween. This was the holiday I sometimes wanted to get past. It’s not that I didn’t like the costumes and the trick or treating. It was that some churches in my town turned Halloween into an opportunity to preach a fear based religion. Some neighbors put signs on their door saying that those who celebrated Halloween were sinners. Others participated in “hell houses” which were essentially haunted houses that showed visitors what hell was like and what sins would get them there. It was a time of year when some churches prayed on the worst fears of people and came up with ideas scarier than any Halloween costume.

They made it sound like Jesus meant the end of the world. And I didn’t want to believe that Jesus and the end of the world had anything in common.

But that’s what Jesus is talking about in today’s Gospel passage. Jesus is talking about the time when he will come, not for the first time, but for the final time. And he is talking about how everything is going to change.

Hear the words of Christ again:

21:25 "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.

21:26 People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

21:27 Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory.

We will know, says Jesus. There will be signs. They will be all around us. And when we see them we will know that Christ has come again. Jesus goes on: "stand up, raise your heads" for when you do you will see what is taking place. Jesus says that the signs we see will be slight at first. They will be like the new leaves on a fig tree that foreshadow the coming of summer. They will be slight, and they will be subtle, but they will be there.

So what are the signs around you? And what are they pointing towards?

I was reading a news magazine earlier this year and I read an article about the end of the first decade of the new millennium. The writer called the last 10 years we've been living in the "Decade from Hell". From 9/11 to financial crises to wars to natural disasters, they wrote, we have been in the midst of the "worst decade ever".

Now, I don't know if that's true. I don't know if this was really the worst decade in the history of the world. I'm thinking the plague was probably pretty bad. The Spanish Inquisition couldn't have been great. But, the point is, for many people, these past few years have been the worst that they can remember. And that, for many, has made this the "decade from hell."

Some see this as a sign. There are some churches that are using what is happening in the world as a way to pray upon the fears and anxieties of those who are at a loss as far as what to do next. They say that we are in the last days, and that the violence and conflict and crises in the world are all the indications that we need. But your faith in Christ, as they understand him at least, and on the last day, in the final judgement, you will be saved.

It's very much like the message I heard down south growing up. The world is going to hell, and the best you can hope to do is save yourself. Believe as we believe, and you will be saved.

I don't think that this is what Jesus meant, exactly. Now, make no mistake, Jesus is talking about things changing completely. Jesus says directly that "heaven and earth will pass away." But, despite the anxiety that comes from this text, this is not a text that is finally about destruction. There is something here that is much deeper than that. Because we don't remain there. And we don't remain alone.

The traditional theme of this passage is hope. It's an odd theme for these texts about the end of the world, isn't it? We're told to be on watch at all times for signs that Jesus is coming for the last time, and that when it comes we will faint and shake. Hope? It sounds more like terror.

But maybe it doesn't have to.

Unlike all those churches who preached about the scariness of the end of days when I was growing up, the ones who tried to scare you into faith, Jesus does something different here. Yes, he says, things will change. And, yes, it will be different and it will shake us up. But, ultimately, this isn't a text about judgement and destruction. The examples that Jesus gives us belie that idea.

Listen to how Jesus tells us to look for the signs of his second coming. He doesn't tell us to look for destruction and violence. He doesn't tell us to look for pain and death. He tells us, instead, to look for signs of life. He tells us to look for the budding of fig trees. He tells us to look for the churning of the oceans. He tells us to look for him and his kingdom.

The reality, and this is a reality that I believe is born out by the story of the Resurrection, is that it is our darkest times that come right before the brightest days. I hear stories in my work a lot. Stories of people who have hit an absolute bottom in their lives. Maybe it was that they finally hit their bottoms with drugs or alcohol. Maybe they realized once and for all that they were in an abusive relationship. Maybe they found out that they had a medical diagnosis that they never expected. Their world had never seemed darker. It was the end of the world for them, or so they thought.

But then, something happened. They got sober. They walked away from the person who was hurting them. They found out they could not only live with their illness, but they could thrive with it.

And, in much the same way, that's how Jesus' vision of his second coming is different too. We hear about the second coming of Jesus, and we might think of those

fundamentalist churches that say it's the end of the world. But maybe it's not just the end of the world, but just the end of the world as we know it.

When I was growing up there was a hit song by a band called REM called "It's the end of the world as we know it." The lyrics included that line with one caveat: "It's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine." I was thinking about this song when I was reading this text because it seems to sum up what Jesus is really talking about here: it's not the end of the world. It's not the end of life. It's just the end of the world as we know it, and, really, we can feel fine.

The great promise of the Gospel, the great promise, is that Jesus is here...and everything is going to change. The wars, the pain, the death, the suffering...they are not signs of the reign of Christ. They are signs that the reign of Christ is yet to come.

The real signs are all around us. Some are as subtle as a new leaf on a fig tree. Others are as unexpected as a baby being born in a lowly manger. They are there, but they are not obvious unless we stop and we look. And that is what the Christian life is all about.

"Be alert at all times" Jesus tells us. Be alert for the end of the world as you know it, because you've never seen anything like what is to come. Be alert in the fall. Be alert for hope, and in hope. And when you are, and when those small signs are seen, join with all the witnesses to Christ's love. Because everything is about to change. And it is going to be better than we could ever imagine.