

Isaiah 65: 17-25
2 Thessalonians 3: 6-13
Luke 21: 5-19

Signs of the Times
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Mary R. Brownlow

We break time up into handy units so that we can predict and plan. For instance, we have about an hour's worth of worship on a Sunday morning. No buzzer goes off at 11:00, but there's that expectation of things coming to a close around then. In other settings, buzzers and bells do go off. I remember sitting in my high school classes – only 50 minutes long, though they seemed endless – watching the clock, waiting desperately for that bell, counting the slow tick of minutes. And other times, when I dreaded the ring of bell or alarm, because it meant that time for peace and rest were over.

We do the same thing with the calendar, ticking off the days, anticipating, dreading, and remembering with joy and sorrow. In the month of November, we have already celebrated or noted a number of special days and times: All Saints Day on the 1st, Divali on the 3rd, Election Day on the 5th, Kristallnacht (or the night of broken glass) on the 9th, Veteran's Day on the 11th; and then there will be Christ the King Sunday on the 24th, Hanukkah beginning on the 27th, and Thanksgiving on the 28th. And of course, there are the weeks, as in National Nurse Practitioner's Week in November, and ...October was Clergy Appreciation Month! If we keep clear of the Corporate Hallmark Card occasions, though, we have a remarkable timetable for remembering the dead, remembering the tragedy of virulent anti-Semitism, celebrating the light overcoming darkness, taking part in political decision making, honoring Christ as Lord, and giving thanks for both agricultural abundance and military victory. We tick off the days in mourning and in celebration, allowing them to define us and shape us, and in some way, point us to the future and not just the past.

The readings both from Isaiah and from Luke speak of the future, but they do it in terms of past events. Isaiah's utopian vision of a city of peace and prosperity specifically contrasts the old days when Jerusalem was attacked - weeping, infant mortality, dislocation, calamity – with a time when “no one shall hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.” Things will be even better than before. It is a lovely, reassuring passage.

By contrast, the Gospel passage is sometimes called Luke's “little apocalypse” and was probably written down in the generation after yet another disaster, another destruction of Jerusalem. To the people of that time, the destruction would have been what the events of 9/11 are for us today: “the day the whole world changed forever,” and something new was revealed, which is the definition of apocalypse. It was significant, a sign. The early Christians understood the Roman conquest and destruction of Jerusalem as that kind of cataclysm, a fulfillment of Jesus' words in the last days of his life. And ever since that time, Christians, with those first disciples, have been asking, “When will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” Over and over, exactly as if Jesus had not replied, “Beware.” Jesus did not offer them a sign. He warns them that being preoccupied with warning signs is dangerous. Jesus does not want his hearers to take his words as a timetable and start counting the days off. He warns the disciples that lots of people will come peddling warnings about the end and giving us a detailed schedule. It is as if he expects the 20th century Hal Lindsey's, Harold Campings, and Tim LaHayes and so warns us about them ahead

of time. At other places in the gospels, Jesus is even more explicit, saying that, “no one knows the day or hour.” He did not call his followers to prophesy about the end times; he warns us to avoid listening to false prophets. The Good News Gospel is not about being able to predict the end of the world or to read supernatural signs. It is also not about building more secure temples so that they will never fall down. The Good News is that Jesus tells us not to be afraid, and that power and comfort are available even in the darkest situations. Later on in the chapter, Jesus says, “When these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Even though we know that all this was written for a specific time and place - first century Jerusalem – we can listen to the words of Jesus and Luke and bring them right here. Temples and towers and institutions will fall. They did in the past and they will again. We have all experienced this in the past and we will again. The Good News of the Gospel will not prevent that, anymore than celebrating Veteran’s Day means that there will never be another war, or Thanksgiving Day means that there will never be another famine. I heard of a pastor’s daughter, who was seven years old, visiting the site of the Twin Towers collapse and looking at the artist’s impression of the new tower to go up in their place. “What’s to stop someone bringing the new one down just the same?” she asked. Our towers are not permanent or immortal. The Good News of our Gospel is that our towers and temples are not what we imagine anyway: their magnificence may even disguise a brokenness or falseness that needs to go. When the towers go, we sometimes see more plainly the power and magnificence of God’s love and compassion. In the space between the falling of one temple and our haste to erect another, we might find ourselves in the presence of grace.

While Jesus speaks in Luke about the upheaval that is coming, God speaks in the book of Isaiah and says, “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth,” and, in another chapter, “All things are being made new.” In the Church, we love verses like this. We also love the Psalms that say, “Sing to the Lord a new song!” If we say those verses often enough, maybe we will actually become convinced that new is good. The images of freshness and vitality they evoke may actually become appealing.

I say this with a smile, because, no matter what we say or sing, churches do not generally like new things. New things bring contentious discussions and furrowed brows. In music, in church policy, in church structure, in renovations – we do not want “all things being made new.” We prefer “all things staying old” thank you very much. I think that this is true whether we are talking about a small town church or an urban church, or a liberal or conservative church. We carry around within us a certain picture, an ideal, of what church is and what religion is, and we love it so much that we do not want that to change. We are hoping to find that picture when we show up on a Sunday morning. It may be some memory of a long ago time when we had a wonderful spiritual experience. And it may be getting in our way.

Recently I heard this put this way, when a pastor asked, "Do you know what prevents you from experiencing God the most? The biggest obstacle in the way of your experiencing God is whatever your last experience of God was. Your last experience, whatever it was, was so wonderful and refreshing and renewing, that you inevitably believe that every future experience will have to be exactly like that. And it won't be."

Temples and towers are not only buildings. We admire and cherish others sorts of temples too: the structures that preserve our sense of stability and comfort. Professional security, health regimens, family relationships. And all of those structures will undergo change, and perhaps tumble

down altogether. Public institutions, private institutions: each has their own time and lifespan. Each temple will fall; heaven and earth will be made new. Each is its own apocalypse: each reveals something previously hidden.

I have heard it said that the Christian Church exists in order to teach us to change gracefully. A bit of a paradox after my earlier rant about the way churches fossilize, but...So many of the ministries of the church are associated with change in human life, some of them unavoidable. Birth, illness, marriage death – the church baptizes children, visits the sick, celebrates weddings, offers memorial services. The church names the grace and blessing that is possible during moments of change, both tumultuous and tender. The church reminds us that our strength and sustenance are rooted in the love of God. In fact, it is moments of change when that love can be most clear and powerful.

The love of God makes all things new, even our timetables and our clocks. Secure in the embrace of God, we let go of structures as they fall away. We place our minutes and our hours and our days and our weeks –ignorant as we are about how to anticipate their length – with trust into loving hands. The Good News is that this is freedom. We are freed from useless anticipation into purposeful appreciation of the blessings of today unfolding into tomorrow. We are freed to let the work of today bear its fruit tomorrow, or in God’s own time.

The English songwriter Brian Wren has written a hymn with a line that goes:
“Someone comes to make things right, tomorrow, today, tonight.
Jesus comes to make things right, tomorrow, today, tonight.”

May we open our eyes to this blessing, and cling to this Good News, whatever becomes of the towers and temples, even when not one stone is left upon another. Amen.