

The Day Will Come
Isaiah 65:17-25 and Luke 21:5-19
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At a recent session during the time in which an elder shares about their faith and life there was a discussion that referenced both Harry Potter and The Lord of the Rings. Being a big fan of Fantasy literature in general I was delighted by the conversation. During the conversation Pastor Scott referenced a quote by the character Gandalf, one of the main characters in the Lord of the Rings, and after that meeting I kept thinking about Gandalf's quote... so much so that I decided to return to the world of middle earth and begin re reading the books. The Lord of the rings is a bit in the zeitgeist these days due to the new prequel series The Rings of Power that is streaming on Amazon, but personally I'm more of a fan of the original work by Tolkien for those of you that have not read or watched the movies:

The story of The Lord of The Rings is an apocalyptic story; good and evil are fighting and if good loses the world will end. But within that larger narrative there is a ring of power created by Evil Dark Lord named Sauron; the purpose of the ring is to bring all of middle earth under the rule and authority of its evil creator. In the history of the middle earth this powerful ring has been worn by different creatures, but Whoever is in possession of the ring is ultimately corrupted by it's evil. And the ring is always leading its ring bearer back to its evil creator.

The ring, oddly, eventually ends up in The Shire, which is the land where the hobbits live. Hobbits are literally small folk who live in simple homes or bungalows built into the sides of the hillside. Hobbits are known to be rather unadventurous, simple folks who are happy to live their lives away from anything that troubles them, and to spend their days gardening, smoking pipes and drinking ale.

But by a twist of fate the ring ends up with a very unlikely owner, Frodo Baggins, a young innocent hobbit. Frodo has an unlikely friend. Gandalf the Wizard. Gandalf realizes that Frodo is in possession of the The Ring of Power and tells Frodo that this ring must be destroyed, and that Gandalf will help Frodo with his call to destroy the ring, but cannot do it for him. In their conversation Frodo is lamenting that this call that has come to him. Frodo tells Gandalf "I wish it had not have happened in my time."

To which Gandalf responds (this is the quote Scott reminded me of) "And so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide, all we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us" A blogger I read this week states

Gandalf is both absolutely terrible and entirely trustworthy at one and the same time. We might do all in our power to keep the ones that we love away from him because we will fear

the task to which he might call them, but he will never call them to something that will do hurt to their true self. Frodo will be tested beyond any limit that he might have conceived possible and yet he will be held by the power that called both himself and Gandalf, a power that bids us wager all that we have for something beyond all possibility.

<https://stephencwinter.com/2018/12/04/all-we-have-to-decide-is-what-to-do-with-the-time-that-is-given-us/>

When I read our Gospel Reading today Jesus words made think of Gandalf and Frodo's conversation. Jesus' words are tough and potentially scary; they call us to work that we just might want to ignore. Like Gandalf, Jesus words are both terrible and trustworthy; they call us to our limit and beyond what we think is possible.

Within the context of the Gospel of Luke today's text occurs after the Triumphal entry (when Jesus arrives in Jerusalem riding on a Donkey), and after Jesus cleanses the temple flipping over tables and driving folks out for making profits in the temple. In The chapter following today's text Judas and religious leaders begin plotting to betray and kill Jesus. So, the context of today's reading is that Jesus knows he has angered a lot of people; he is also angry because of what he has encountered at the temple and Jesus knowing what is to come he is most likely preparing to be arrested and executed. So, it is safe to assume that Jesus isn't in a good mood and it's also important to note that Jesus is not calling the disciples or us today to a call that he himself is not also called to.

The setting of our text today is the temple. The temple by all historical accounts was magnificent and beautiful. It was built by Herod and one commentator notes that it was *The jewel in Herod's architectural crown. The New Testament remembers Herod as a paranoid despot, but history and archeologists remember him as a builder. Everyone was impressed by the temple... (Feasting On The Word Commentary)*
Everyone but Jesus.

While in the temple the disciples begin commenting on the beauty and grandeur of the temple. They marvel at its beauty and the enormity of it. Jesus, however, was focused on something different. Our lectionary reading today begins with vs 5 of Luke 21, but the first four verses of Luke 21 is the story often referred to as the widow's mite. Jesus is watching as a widow gives her offering, a small amount, but also an incredibly generous amount because she gave all (100%) of what she had. This text is often lifted up as an example of generosity and good giving habits. Even if what you have to give is small it is still worth it to give. In the context of the gospel of Luke, I'm not sure that is what Jesus is saying. Rather I think Jesus is angered by the way the religious system around her is not providing or caring for her.

So, after watching the widow make her offering and standing in the middle of this grand ostentatious temple Jesus tells his disciples that the temple will be destroyed. Which to the disciples sounds ludicrous. Why would the temple be destroyed? This would have been unimaginable to them Jesus tells them that every stone will be torn down. (And in 70AD the temple is in fact destroyed.)

Jesus' predictions go from bad to worse; not only will the temple be destroyed, but there will also be wars and insurrections, and nation against nations, kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes and famines and plagues, and if this wasn't enough, the bad news will get personal. He says You will be arrested and persecuted, You will be betrayed by your family, and some of you will even lose your life.

Today's text is often considered or referred to as an eschatological text. Yes that is a big word that essentially means having to do with the End. Eschatology is the theological study of the end times. Presbyterians generally don't get caught up in these discussions. but there are some Christian traditions who use this Luke text to predict the coming end of the world. Like the disciples in this text, one might get carried away and want to know when the end is coming and how we might prepare it, but Jesus warns us here to not get caught up in that sort of discourse. He warns the disciples to not listen to everyone who speaks in his name for there will be false prophets, and he tells them to not even prepare or make a defense for when that time comes. For Jesus will be with his followers and will provide them what they will need when they need it.

I think Jesus is not telling his disciples or us today about one big final ending that is coming in some distant future, but rather I think Jesus is telling us that this world is full of beginnings and endings, that this is how our broken world works. We build things and they eventually fall apart, nations will turn against nations, natural disasters will change the face of the earth, plagues- or pandemics will change us...

Today's Gospel passage asks us: When you lose the thing you didn't think you would ever lose, when the thing that you put your confidence in is gone, when the truth you thought was true turns out to be false.... What do we do? (Working Preacher Podcast)

We all may wish that it would not happen in our time, and yet all we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us and Jesus instructs us to place our hope and trust in that which is eternal. The love of God made real through Jesus Christ. That we lean into the wisdom of God. And to continue to testify to that Love no matter what comes our way.

One Commentator Notes:

Suffering always means pain, disruption, separation, and impoliteness- it can render us powerless and mute- push us to the borders of hopelessness and despair. The opportunity to testify during times of destruction is in part the audacity to muster courage in the face of fear, the boldness to speak in the face of suffering. (Feasting on the Word Commentary)

What does it mean to go forth and testify? How do we testify to the Love of God? I believe that there are several ways in which we can do this:

1. Don't ignore the call; just because something is hard or uncomfortable doesn't mean it isn't God's will. Just because something is different than how it used to be doesn't mean God is not the author of the change.
2. Don't be discouraged when life gets hard, or when it feels as though the world around us is crumbling. The call is not always easy or pretty, but God will sustain us through it. Brene Brown- in a podcast talks about her return to faith- she returned to church hoping

it would be like an epidural, to numb any of her pain. But she says in reality church was more like a mid-wife saying push harder, feel more. Following Jesus is not a way of avoiding pain- but rather Jesus is what will sustain us when it hurts.

3. Lean on your community/ church for support; don't suffer in silence - let this congregation support and care for you
4. But also, we testify to Christ's love by being a friend and helper to someone else who is in a time of need unlike the folks in our story today who ignore the woman who gave all she had away; let us be people who see and respond to those suffering in our midst.

You may have noticed by looking at the front of your bulletin that today is Stephen Ministry Sunday. Stephen Ministry is a ministry and training that all of the deacons of our church take part in. In short Stephen Ministry is a way that we equip members of our congregation to support other members of our congregation who are in the middle of the tough parts of life. In just a couple of moments Pat Matheson will be sharing with us about Stephen Ministry and will be explaining what Stephen Ministry is and inviting you to consider if you might be called to be a Stephen Minister, or how you might be called to connect with a Stephen Minister in general .

Not to overdo the connections with Lord of the Rings. but as I was reading the books this week it stood out to me just how important the character of Samwise Gamgee is to the storyline. Sam is a fellow hobbit and best friend to Frodo. Sam travels with Frodo on his mission to destroy the ring. Sam is not able to carry the ring for Frodo, but he is able to journey with him through all the pain and suffering. I think this is what Stephen Ministry is all about it - it is about loving your fellow community member so much that you are willing to bear witness and be a companion on their journey. I also think that we can learn from Frodo that sometimes life is so tough. That we can't do it all on our own, and it is okay to be vulnerable and allow a fellow community member to journey with us through the pain that we are in the midst of. I actually think that sometimes that is the harder call... allowing others to see us in pain.

Our Old Testament Passage this morning is from Isaiah is also an Eschatological text; but unlike the text in Luke it is a beautiful hopeful passage about the day that will come when there is a new heaven and a new earth, there will be no more weeping, there will be joy, and the lion and the lamb will play together. The words are wonderful, but the prophetic message is given at a time and to people who cannot imagine hope being restored. This prophetic word is given to people who have been ravaged by exile and war and persecution, the people Isaiah is speaking to need to hear this word because it is hard to believe that God will show up again.

But the good news is that God will show up again. Our hope is bigger than this world, that when all is lost, nothing is lost because we can cling to that which is eternal, the love of God made real in Jesus Christ. The day will come when we face the ending of something that we love, but in the face of endings we can continue to share the testimony of Christ's love. For we will not be abandoned. God's mercies are new ever morning. Great is God's faithfulness, Amen.

Let us Pray:

Holy God... the world changes daily things of this world come to an end and new life is brought forth... through the ups and downs be our companion through it all. Bring us friends and helpers who will walk with us through it all... and help us to live into your call no matter what we face. Amen