

Enduring an Uncertain Future

Luke 21:5-19

Needless to say, it has been a breathtaking few days since the unexpected election of Donald J. Trump last Tuesday. The pollsters and pundits were not so prescient and America has elected him (by virtue of the Electoral College) to be our next president. The triumphal celebration of the Trump side, though, already has been offset by widespread protests and utter gloom voiced from those who did not see (or want to see) this happening.

Quite frankly, when campaigning began 18 months ago, few would have predicted the result or the scene we saw on Thursday, when President Obama met with the President-elect. The two of them sitting side-by-side in the Oval Office poignantly symbolizes the conflicting and rival visions for what was at stake in this long, bitter campaign and what the country ultimately stands for. In many ways, the brightest light cast was on how American democracy succeeds from administration to administration with a peaceful transfer of power. The divisions that exist between the parties and in the electorate—seemingly split down the center—run abysmally deep and have been difficult to bridge, even amidst a groundswell of desire for reconciliation and patriotic loyalty.

So here we are, waiting to see what the change in Washington will bring with it. Whether or not you love the results of this election, this is democracy in America. Frankly, for our commonwealth and common good, Americans must find a way to move forward together.

I admit, that won't be easy, given the partisan fever. More significantly, what can't be overlooked is how traumatized many people are at this point because of what Mr. Trump said and did throughout his life

and, particularly, during this campaign. He has unleashed a level of brash nativism and indecency that we are not accustomed to seeing in political campaigns. We have no idea what his first 100 days in office will bring, let alone the entirety of his administration. I recognize this could be said about any incoming president, but it is categorically different this time in terms of the rhetoric and rage and Trump's own documented character and manner. This concern has been voiced even by many who ultimately voted for him, including leaders of his own party. Since Mr. Trump has no track record as a government official working on behalf of and accountable to the public, it's very sobering now that he will be quite possibly the most powerful person on earth! Voters got their iconoclastic outsider, but what will this mean to us in time? We honestly don't know. Thus, by all trusted and time-honored measures, America has ahead of it a very uncertain future.

Perhaps for that very reason, we must pray for our country and its leaders to work together for the best results. Frankly, President-elect Trump is due our respect and prayers, even if people dislike his character, disagree with his policies, or protest his executive actions. As we heard expressed this past week, those who are worried or angry about the election must keep an open mind and give him a chance to lead our nation. As with every president (unless they prove us wrong), we should grant him the benefit of the doubt that he will take seriously his responsibility to govern fairly, wisely, and with the interests of the entire nation (even of those who oppose him), for he no longer will be all that we've come to know of him over the years, he will be our 45th president. As we have seen over time, even maverick politicians will behave and govern more prudently than they promised on the campaign trail, since the gravity of the office and the

realpolitik of the world beckon it. May that turn out to be true for all our sakes.

Ironically, I chose the title of this sermon long before last Tuesday. “Enduring an Uncertain Future” was based on today’s lectionary Gospel text from Luke, not with the election results in mind. But as it often happens, the prescribed Scriptures for a given Sunday find a way to be relevant, almost as if God had a hand in it. To see if this holds true, let’s shift gears and explore the Gospel lesson itself.

The setting of Luke 21 is toward the end of Jesus’ life when he was in Jerusalem teaching in the Temple, a day or two before he was arrested and crucified. It serves as the climax to Jesus’ teaching, if not his public ministry; it’s a preparatory message to his disciples—not only for the rest of the week’s events, but for what will occur after Jesus leaves the scene (a perspective that Luke obviously had decades later). As a rule, this part of the gospel tends to only interest those who are captivated by doomsday countdowns and End Times theology in modern popular culture, as it seems somewhat mysterious and esoteric which, once fused with Revelation and other texts, makes for an intriguing riddle for those interested in predicting the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the world as we know it. Except, that’s not what it is, nor are we the audience to whom Jesus (through the Gospel writer) was speaking.

The intended audience were those in the early church facing scrutiny and hardship in the decades following Jesus’ death and resurrection. Namely, the Gospel was written in the tumultuous wake of Jerusalem’s destruction in 70 CE, subtly alluded to in Jesus’ words, “the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down” (vs. 6). By the time the Gospels were produced, this had already occurred,

resulting in utter devastation to the Judean people and Jewish heritage, especially because of the burning, demolition, and desecration of the Temple by Titus' armies—the only remaining evidence of it today being the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. As one Jewish commentator described it:

When the Jews of Jerusalem were famished, Titus seized the Antonia fortress north of the Temple Mount. It took him another month to capture the Temple Mount itself...Titus's furious troops set fire to the Temple building and massacred every Jew they could lay their hands on. The carnage was horrible. Few people were able to escape the Upper City, where the forces of Yohanan and Simeon held out. Titus was crowned *imperator* by his troops, who in return received the license to pillage, loot, rape, and murder... This was one of the greatest disasters of Jewish history. The Jews have never been able to properly mourn their loss of the Second Temple. ¹

Titus' sacking of Jerusalem was violent and bloody, leaving Jewish rebels and thousands of civilian victims scattered through the streets either due to starvation or massacred by military might. Many early Christians would have been among them. The destruction of the Temple stands “as the great divide of Jewish history, separating Jewish political power from Jewish powerlessness.”²

This defining moment also deeply impacted the early Christian hope for imminent return of Christ and the establishment of the messianic realm of God in Jerusalem. The very center for Jewish messianic hope was destroyed. Suddenly, inherited teachings were reinterpreted to suggest an indeterminate time, though it would be prefaced with signs which would encourage perseverance and faithfulness. That is largely the perspective in which the New Testament writings came into being. Someday the realm of God will be fulfilled on earth, but what that would mean and how long it would take to come into being differed among communities, as it still does.

¹Avner Falk, *A Psychoanalytic History of the Jews*, Farleigh Dickenson University Press, 1996, pp. 308-9.

²*Ibid.* pg. 311.

So, what we are left with are Scriptures that promise this eventful time, but with little definition or detail. One can go through this passage and cite all manner of things that preface it: self-proclaimed saviors, doomsday prophets, wars and rumors of wars, nations rising against nations, earthquakes, famines, and plagues, dreadful portents in the skies. Certainly, one could argue that our current times might qualify as a historical period when all of these things have appeared. But then, so have many other eras throughout the two thousand years from when these words were first spoken or written. In other words, the takeaway isn't the doomsday predictions of clear and evident signs; the takeaway is something else found in the admonition Jesus delivers: do not be misled by false prophets or "saviors," do not go after them, do not fear them, do not be alarmed. Things like this must occur and will occur, as they have throughout human history. Bottom line: do not lose your faith, your values, or your hope, regardless of what occurs.

As I see it, the climax of this passage comes from verses 12-19, where Luke describes arrests, persecution, and hardship faced by those who, as messianic followers of Jesus, suddenly faced social and political pressure because of what they stood for. In some cases, they became scapegoats for those in power—early on, it was Judean leaders who blamed this messianic fringe group for undermining Jewish identity and, eventually, their survival. A little later, both Jews and Christians faced persecution, as they were arrested and brought before Roman authorities accused of militancy, political resistance, and of being potential threats to the stability of Pax Romana and imperial rule. Harassment and persecution continued for decades (locally or widespread) depending on the specific time and emperor.

Luke offers counsel through the words of Jesus which was essentially this: whatever you face, do not be alarmed; I will be with you; I will provide the inspiration for your defense if you are faithful to my word and ways; if you endure you will gain your souls. In other words, use these moments as an opportunity to testify to the truth—speaking truth to power—and to bear witness of the values of your faith. Rest assured, the Spirit of Jesus will inspire you with confidence and a purposeful message. Trust in the faithfulness of God; speak and act humbly in the spirit of Christ. Certainly, this came to be critically important guidance for those facing uncertain times in the first generations of the church, who justifiably were fearful for their own welfare and survival.

Are we in a similar time as this? It's possible. The likelihood is, we always are. Every era, every moment in history, every context in human civilization requires a calling out of prophetic voices, as well as a sense of trust and endurance to speak the truth to power and do what is right. We have no idea how the future will unfold—no one does. So what we might face today will not be much different than what previous generations faced in the challenges of their times all the way back through history. Yes, there are different actors, different circumstances. But the same truth applies: we are called to stand firm for what is right, to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

One of the challenges I see today in light of this recent political campaign is to recognize who our neighbor is all across the landscape of our society and world. The reason I mention this is because loving our neighbor may be the single most important expression of love, since that is where we human beings come up short every time. In the world of religions, a love of God is expressed easily, certainly more than a love of

neighbors. Yet, in light of Jesus' teachings, who could we say is not our neighbor? If we start listing potential threats and enemies to our country, we are immediately checked by Jesus' command to love even our enemies. So clearly there is no one outside of the commandment to love. To bear witness of Christ in any age is to stand up for our neighbors (particularly the vulnerable) and treat everyone with respectful love and compassionate care—all of our neighbors, whomever they are, wherever they are from, whatever anyone's list of exceptions might be—Syria, Pakistan, Mexico, Nigeria, China, Russia, Appalachia, Alabama, California, or our nation's capital!

It makes no difference under whose power we serve, or whose administration leads the nation, or which party governs, or who we voted for—loving our neighbor always come into play. Our faithfulness is inspired by the example of Jesus and those who would not cower in the face of opposition to stand up, speak truth to power, and act, according to their conscience, to do the right thing to love and protect their neighbors. That's why we support and invest in our ministry here—to cultivate and nurture our ability to love God and to love our neighbors. Perfect (and perfected) love is what casts out fear!

To all who feel disenfranchised and powerless by the results of the election and fear the changes coming to our country, let me say this. Every lifetime has its gains and losses; every movement has its ebb and flow. History is replete with examples of how power corrupts and powerlessness prevails. For those who are angry or distressed, yes, this election has been a devastating time of defeat for what you believe in, and the future may seem bleak. But remember, we live in a democracy where many views exist and various parties and policies invariably have their day and opportunity

to advance. When defeats come, then like a plant that has been pruned back, it makes way for new growth in the next season—new leaders, new ideas, new people, new dreams that eventually will have their time to flourish as well. This is the way life goes in its cyclical patterns and constant dialectic—civilization and Nature itself are rarely linear. Through all of humankind’s changes, God’s faithfulness endures and divine inspiration never wanes. We are called to keep true to our faith, our hope, and our values in whatever we face, in season and out of season.

So, whatever your politics may be, whomever it was that you voted for, it makes no difference; we still share the same calling and mandate. May we embrace Jesus’ ever relevant challenge to us all; may we stand up for what we believe, but unite around love and care for all people. May we endure through difficult times however we judge them to be—wherever and whenever they occur—in order to express our primary allegiance to the One whose gospel of love knows no bounds and whose call to justice and compassionate mercy never ends.

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13 November 2016