

I Would Plant an Apple Tree

Luke 21:5-19

November 17, 2019

Emily M. Brown

At the church where I served before this one, for a period of some years we would end the scripture readings by saying “this is the good news,” and the congregation would respond, “thanks be to God.” After a while, we ended up changing to a different response, because although the Gospel – that is, the good news of God’s love made known in Jesus Christ – is good news, not every passage that comes from the Gospels (that is, the biblical accounts of Jesus life) fits with the response “this is the good news.” Often, what we read in the bible is good news; other times, it is perplexing; and at other times, it seems like downright bad news.

Today’s passage is one that it would be hard to follow with the phrase “this is the good news.” Over the course of the year (that is, the Christian year – starting from the beginning of Advent in 2018) we’ve been making our way through the Gospel of Luke. We go a little out of order – first we read the accounts of the events leading up to Jesus’ birth. Then his birth and childhood. Then some of the early part of his ministry. Then comes the season of Lent, when we focus on readings that have a theme of suffering and sacrifice. Then comes Holy Week, with its account of Palm Sunday, Jesus’ trial, suffering, death, and resurrection. Then in Eastertide, the resurrection appearances. Then Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Then we backtrack, picking up again and working our way through Jesus’ ministry. We’re approaching the end of the liturgical year and the end of the Gospel of Luke, and so today’s reading comes from the part of

the account where the tone is dark and tense, and Jesus' impending crucifixion is imminent and inevitable.

Jesus and the disciples have arrived in Jerusalem, and have gone to the temple. The disciples are marveling at it. Under Herod the Great, the temple (which had been built by Solomon, destroyed by the Babylonians, and rebuilt after exile) had attained new grandeur, with Herod financing projects to refurbish the temple and bring it to new glory. The disciples are understandably amazed at what they see, and are marveling at it. But Jesus stops them short: "as for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down," he warns. He describes things that will take place: people will come in his name, and they should not be led astray. There will be wars and insurrections. Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes, famines, and plagues, portents and signs from heaven. And in the midst of this, he says, they should not be terrified.

But before these final things that he speaks of, he continues, there will be personal calamities – not the end of the world, but persecution of Christians. Trials and arrests and prisons; betrayals from family and friends, even executions. Jesus promises that in those moments, they do not need to prepare a speech, but simply to trust that Jesus will give them the words, and that by their endurance, they will gain their souls.

Is this the good news?

Perhaps it is.

Many interpreters remind us that one of the central commandments of the New Testament is "fear not." It's what the angels say to Mary, and to Zechariah, and to the shepherds. It is what Jesus says to the disciples, and to the crowd, many times throughout his ministry. And he

reminds them here: as he summons up the most terrifying images he can dream of, he reminds them: do not be afraid. Because no matter what terrifying thing they encounter in the world, they can trust that God will be faithful to God's promises, that the Spirit will abide with them every step of the way, and that Jesus spoke of every calamity as part of the journey toward the day when God will set everything right.

The great reformer Martin Luther is said to have declared, "If tomorrow is the Day of Judgment, then today I want to plant an apple tree."

It is that kind of faith that Jesus means to inculcate in the disciples – and in us. He invites them to grow deep roots in God's love, so that they will not be panicked by any of the storms that are on the horizon, so that they will have the quiet trust and confidence to live out their discipleship no matter what happens. "If tomorrow is the Day of Judgment, then today I want to plant an apple tree." In other words, a person who has a deep and abiding trust in God's love and grace will show the kind of discipleship which is steady and consistent, living out God's law of love in all times and places and circumstances.

One of my teachers – an Episcopal priest who supervised my CPE group – used to talk about the difference between being reactive and being responsive – terms that I believe he drew from the work of a psychologist named Dr. Bowen. Reactivity, in this way of thinking, is when we act out our off-the-cuff, gut-level feelings – ones which often stem from fear, or hurt, or anxiety. When someone says something that hurts your feelings and you lash out – that's reactive. When the news has you overwhelmed and you snap at your spouse – that's reactive. When someone is weeping and you feel uncomfortable with their grief so you change the topic, or try to minimize their distress – that's reactive. Responsivity, on the other hand, is when we don't ignore the

painful things around and within us, but are able to deal with them from a place of calm and thoughtfulness. When you communicate clearly about your own feelings – that’s responsive. When you respond to someone else’s distress without taking it into yourself – that’s responsive. When you do the internal work of figuring out how to de-escalate your own fight-or-flight instincts so you can communicate in the way you want to – that’s responsive.

It seems to me that Jesus is not trying to give the disciples bad news. He was right: Christians would be persecuted, and some would be executed. There would be wars and earthquakes and famines and tragedies before history drew to a close – and there have been. More than the disciples ever imagined, probably. Jesus wasn’t just trying to tell them these things would happen. He was trying to offer them this good news: their own internal emotional state does not need to be subject to what happens in the world. It can be well with their souls – and our souls – in the darkest of times. Because God holds each of them – each of us – in loving hands, in the calm and in the storm.

This world is custom-made to whip us into a frenzy every single day. Right now, it’s impeachment hearings, and another mass shooting, and all the other things that are dominating the headlines. But before that, there were other things – hurricanes, terrorist attacks, economic worries, and more. Then there is social media, with all the petty squabbling and viral videos that stoke outrage and scorn and all our other baser instincts. And the hectic pace of our personal lives. Everything in this world seems to be trying to disorient and overwhelm. Everything in the world is adapted to make us panic – and our panic does not benefit us, or our loved ones, or the world, or the church.

Martin Luther said: “If tomorrow is the Day of Judgment, then today I want to plant an apple tree.”

Jesus said: “Do not be terrified. Not a hair of your head will perish.”

So what are we who wish to follow Christ to do? We are not called to ignore the events of the world around us, burying our heads in the sand. But whenever we feel frenzied and panicked and overwhelmed, we are invited to slow down, to become responsive instead of reactive.

Perhaps you have your ways of doing that. Here are some of mine: I turn off the news for a while. I bake something from scratch. I go for a run, or to an exercise class. I pray.

Jesus doesn't promise that nothing bad will ever happen in this world. But Jesus does promise that our hope and our help will be found in the midst of all that we fear. Jesus invites us to let God cultivate in us a spirit which will be deeply rooted in trust, resistant to fear and panic and outrage, steadfastly following the path of discipleship no matter what storm may come our way. And Jesus does promise that no calamity – global or personal – can separate us from God. So when the storms start to overwhelm us, let us deepen our roots, calm our fears, and trust in the one who promises to be with us in all things.

Amen.