

+ Luke 21:5-19 + Series: Blessed... + Theme: Blessed Are Those Who Know! +
+ 26th Sunday after Pentecost + 13 November 2016 +

“It’s the end of the world as we know it. It’s the end of the world as we know it. It’s the end of the world as we know it...and I feel fine.” Years ago when I was in school, you often heard that song by the band REM blare away at school dances or on the radio. If you try reading through the lyrics of the song today, they don’t make much sense because they’re really nothing more than a rapid stream of consciousness, but that refrain? That refrain not only gave the song its name, but it’s become one of the most famous lyrics from the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In fact, that refrain has almost become cliché. Watch one of those apocalyptic movies where gigantic alien spaceships threaten to destroy the earth and the song pops up as a ringtone. Google the song title and you will find thousands of articles or blog posts using it for a headline. People often attach that phrase, ***“It’s the end of the world as we know it,”*** to whatever crisis they think is on the horizon. This week you heard it from many who didn’t vote for Donald Trump, but next week you’ll hear it from people worried about something or someone completely different.

Why? People get worried. People get nervous. People get scared when they don’t know what’s coming, when they realize that they don’t have control of what’s going to happen, when they think the worst is going to happen—something apocalyptic, something that will destroy everything that they hold dear. So people start talking about whatever crisis happens to be in front of them as if it’s the ***“end of the world as we know it...”***

Yet it’s not just people “out there,” is it? You and I tend to do that too—to get worried, to get nervous, to get scared because we don’t know how things will turn out or what’s going to happen because it’s outside of our control. When the unexpected or the shocking or the inexplicable happens, you begin to wonder if ***“it’s the end of the world as we know it...”***

...But are any of those terrifying unknowns, whether political elections or natural disasters or health scares or financial crises, really ***“the end of the world”***? You can look back on certain major events in history like the Fall of Rome or the Black Plague or the American Civil War or the fall of the Iron Curtain and you can see how the world changed dramatically. Yet even then, none of those events brought on the actual end of the world. I can assure you that what’s taken place in the last week or the unusual events of the last year or even all that’s happened in the last decade or so has not brought about the actual end of the world. No, that’s still coming! While we and so many others around us worry how this crisis or that scare could potentially end our comfortable way of doing things right now, we all tend to forget that what we think is the end of the world is only just another symptom or sign indicating that the Last Day is still coming.

This morning our Scripture lessons and hymns and prayers cause us to think about the Last Day, to focus not on what we or others might think is ***“the end of the world as we know it”*** right now, but on what’s really coming. To be honest, you wouldn’t be out of line if you were a little scared by what you heard earlier from the Old Testament prophet Malachi and the Apostle Paul, but did you also hear the note of hope? Any time the Lord speaks about the coming end of our world, he always includes that reminder to worried believers like you and me. Even as our world gets closer to its actual end, even though you don’t know what the future holds, you can trust in the One who holds the future, the One who replaces your fear with expectant joy, the One who has eternal glory awaiting his faithful followers.

Who knew that a discussion about architecture would lead to such a reason for hope? It was Tuesday of Holy Week. In a matter of days, Jesus would be betrayed, crucified, dead, buried, and risen again, but not today. He had spent some time teaching his disciples in the courts of the temple in Jerusalem. It was getting late. It was time to head back to where they were staying outside the city. As they walked through the temple courts marveling at the marble columns, the gold and bronze doors, and the massive stones, the disciples couldn’t help but talk about the amazing architecture of the temple complex. Yet they came to a dead stop when Jesus told them, ***“As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.”***

Destruction was coming for this magnificent place? Yes, it would come for Jerusalem and one day for the entire world too. Some disciples started to get nervous. Others were curious. ***“Teacher...when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?”*** They wanted to know what was going to happen, so they could be ready.

So Jesus told them. ***“Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and ‘The time is near.’ Do not follow them.”*** False teachers will come claiming to be God’s Anointed. Some will claim to have a divine revelation from God that no one else knows. All will come proclaiming what people want to hear rather than what they need to hear. Such false teaching will even deceive many Christians.

Jesus spoke of wars and rumors of wars. ***“Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.”*** No war will end all wars. Sadly, world peace between nations will never happen because conflict and bloodshed will continue to ravage nations and peoples. Jesus spoke of natural disasters ***“in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.”*** Creation will recognize that its end and its Lord are coming soon.

Such ***“fearful events”*** will indicate that the end is coming, but ***“the end will not come right away.”*** Jesus didn’t want his followers to be terrified, because ***“these things must happen.”*** Even if all those political and natural events seem like the end of the world, they will not be the end. ***“But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name... You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. All men will hate you because of me.”***

Persecution would come for Christ’s followers. At first, it would be ridicule and strange looks and confused reactions. Then it would become loss of jobs, loss of homes, loss of status, and betrayal by loved ones and former friends. Eventually it would become even more painful—separation of families, imprisonment, and even death. Such painful persecution would come to the early Christians and has continued in different parts of our world to the present day. ***“All men will hate you because of me.”***

...But the Lord, who holds the future of all things and who watches over his flock, had promises for his fearful followers, promises about the future. ***“This will result in your being witnesses to them. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict... All men will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. By standing firm you will gain life.”***

Jesus will use that persecution as an opportunity for his followers of every age to testify about him, about the Savior who has remained faithful to his people and always will, about the Savior who would die just a few days later, but who would rise again to conquer Satan and overcome the world forever. Jesus promised to provide words and wisdom that could not be overcome by imperial decree or violence or even death. Before rulers and hostile crowds, they would faithfully testify that they followed Jesus—and no other. ***“Salvation is found in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”*** (Acts 4:12)

Yes, those who follow Jesus could lose everything, even their own lives, ***“but not a hair of your head will perish. By standing firm you will gain life...”***—eternal life. Jesus, who had saved them from an eternity in hell by forgiving their sins, would graciously give them the gift of eternal life. So as they and those after them saw those signs, Jesus wanted his followers to remember who held them and their future in the palm of his almighty and merciful hand. Jesus would rescue his followers from all those ***“fearful events.”*** Ultimately his return in glory and power would make that happen.

We still see all these signs today, don’t we? While in and of themselves, they are not the end of the world, they certainly indicate that it’s coming. We see terrifying natural disasters that defy explanation. We see how easily even Christians can be deceived by flashy false prophets—no matter what they peddle. We see how quickly people rush to fight each other, threaten each other, or attack each other, not to mention the bloodlust of wars and rumors of wars. We see terrible tragedies and we’re tempted to cry out, “Why God? Why did you allow this to happen?” Then we see how freely people express their hatred for Christians because we follow Jesus, his Word, and his will, which directly contradicts the whims and ways of our culture. We see it in their ridicule and their public attacks. We see how thousands of people in Africa and Asia and the Middle East have lost their livelihoods, their churches, their loved ones, and their lives because they followed Jesus. You would think we have every reason to be worried about what the future holds.

...But recall who holds the future and what He has promised! Jesus made promises about the future with the ironclad guarantee of his blood and righteousness, of his life sacrificed on the cross and his empty tomb on Easter Sunday. ***“By standing firm you will gain life.”*** That doesn’t mean you’ll somehow earn eternal life, but you stand firm on Christ alone, in whom you trust through the hearing of his Holy Word, and he gives you eternal life. Through fumbling lips, he gives us words and wisdom from his Word to testify about him even to those who hate him. He cares for us even as all these events threaten to fill our hearts with fear of the unknown, and he will deliver us from those fearful events just as he promised.

At the end of that famous REM refrain, you hear four words that describe the very opposite of how we all typically react to what seems like the end of the world. ***“It’s the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine.”*** In a sense, that’s how you and I as followers of Jesus can look towards the future. Now I can’t tell you what your future holds or your family’s future or our nation’s future. I can’t even tell you when Jesus will return. Jesus doesn’t either, but he will return, just as he promised. So you don’t have to be afraid. You don’t have to get nervous. You don’t have to worry about controlling what you can’t. No, you can actually ***“feel fine”*** about the future and be blessed, because you know He holds the future. Amen.