

Sermon – Luke 21:5-19
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“Don’t Panic”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Do not be terrified, Jesus says, when you hear of wars and insurrections. Nations will rise against nations; the earth will shake, people will starve and suffer, and the heavens themselves will show forth dreadful portents. And there’s more! While this is going on, don’t be surprised if you are hated and persecuted, betrayed and even killed for Jesus’ sake. And yet, Jesus says, “Not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.” First, I’m going to assume that “hair of our heads” is a metaphor, and that Jesus is not excluding those of us who are follicly challenged from his coming kingdom. And second, I’m going to ask, what is Jesus talking about and how, finally, is it good news?
2. Jesus’ words are in response to the disciples’ awestruck wonder as they wander the grounds of the Jerusalem Temple. In those days, the temple was undergoing grand renovations. God’s home on earth was being expanded by King Herod, and it was magnificent. Jesus’ response, however, is not to remark upon what a fitting dwelling place it is for the divine. He simply says that even this grand structure, even God’s house, will one day fall apart. Not one stone will be left upon another. This, his friends correctly interpret, is apocalyptic language, a revelation signifying ends and new beginnings. Naturally, they ask: When will it happen? This is where we get Jesus’ words about wars and disasters and persecutions. But note that Jesus never answers the “when” question, nor does he say how the looming problems

will relate to the end that will follow. Maybe, the timing of this world's ending is too shrouded in mystery; maybe Jesus' hard words are less predictive than they are descriptive.

3. Douglas Adams's absurdist science-fiction novel *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* begins with the end of the world. The apocalypse is not the result of judgment for human sin (although Adams is a keen observer of our folly); instead, earth is destroyed by an interstellar construction crew building a hyperspatial express route. The end of the world here is the result of galactic zoning laws and meandering bureaucracies, not divine action. The sufferings that preceded the end of the world are likewise not signs of divine wrath; they are the natural result of human hubris. Musing upon which species is earth's most intelligent, Adams writes: "On the planet Earth, [humans] had always assumed that [they were] more intelligent than dolphins because [they] had achieved so much – the wheel, New York, wars and so on – whilst all the dolphins had ever done was muck about in the water having a good time. But conversely, the dolphins had always believed that they were far more intelligent than [humans] – for precisely the same reasons."
4. Jesus, I think, is not speaking of signs that will point to the world's end. Rather, he is describing what life is like, what it will continue to be like, until the world's end. You will hear of wars and insurrections, of school shootings and great wildfires near human communities, of global warming and impeachment proceedings, and of the everyday griefs and sorrows of your personal lives. These things will happen for many reasons, often because in our sinfulness we are prideful; in our pride is our downfall. We have created a world in which sin is pervasive, systemic. As Stephen Ray, my friend and the president of Chicago Theological Seminary, recently pointed out, the doctrine of Original Sin remains useful not because it reminds us that we're all horrible people with nothing good about us, but because Sin is a power beyond the personal. In the words of Dr. Ray, "Systems gonna system just like

- sinner's gonna sin. It's inescapable." Further, we cannot pretend that because we're good people of the correct political outlook or worldview or whatever that we can simply exempt ourselves from the world's systems. The mere idea is foolishness born of privilege.
5. So what do we do in this world that will continue to fall apart until not one stone remains upon another? We look to Jesus, and we listen to him. Our hope as children of God is founded on the cornerstone of a new temple. God's home among mortals is no longer to be found in bricks and mortar built up by human hands. God's home is specifically and forever to be found in Jesus Christ, he whose bodily temple was broken down upon the cross; he whose body was resurrected and then ascended, filling all in all. It is in Christ that we have already died, and it is Christ that we already live. In him, not a hair on our head can be harmed.
 6. For us, this means that the sings, signs, and systems of this world, no matter how apocalyptic they might seem, are not meant to draw our eyes to the heavens nor make us wonder when Jesus is coming back. He will return when he will return. But he is also already here. And so, in the face of war and gun violence, in the wake of natural disasters or in the midst of our world's environmental collapse, we turn back to the world. We cannot escape it. We dare not pretend that we can live above it. But raised up in the risen Christ, we can act freely within it for the sake of this world that God loves so much. Bearing the name of Jesus, we anticipate the work he will one day complete by doing that work today. We endure, keep on, for in our endurance we bear witness to the salvation of our souls.
 7. Not one stone will be left upon another. This world will fall apart, *is* falling apart right now. It seems that there is no end to the bad news. But one day there will be, and the good news of Jesus' resurrection guarantees that we have nothing to truly fear. No need to panic or worry. Until Christ comes

again, let us keep building the world back up with the same love and grace that will bring us from this world to the next. As things fall apart, let us rebuild them. They'll fall apart again, to be sure. Rebuild them again until Christ completes his work. We can't escape this world. We don't need to. God's home is here, with us. Let us live in it as living signs of the risen Christ, knowing that one day the sun of righteousness will rise, and a new day will dawn with healing in its wings. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.