

Advent 1 (C)
November 6, 2020
Text: Luke 21:25-36

Pastor Aaron J. Couch
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, Oregon

Jesus invested his effort, his whole self, to nurture a vision among his people of what the life-giving work of God, the reign of God, would look like as it blossomed within human community. It would look like compassion for those in difficult circumstances and forgiveness for those who needed a second or third chance. It would look like reconciliation where relationships were strained and welcome for outsiders. Those with plenty would share with those without, and everyone would have enough. It would look like humility and generosity and kindness. It would be a reflection of how God relates to us, and it would mean healing for the human family.

By the time he had arrived in Jerusalem, Jesus saw clearly that the religious authorities did not want the reign of God, or at least they didn't want it if it required any sacrifice of their privilege and power. Jesus understood that they would rather kill him than open their hearts to God's way of healing. But Jesus had entrusted himself to God, and he would not turn away from what was coming. Jesus also saw that if his people turned away from his vision for the reign of God, and instead embraced a vengeful, self-righteous religious nationalism, it could only end badly, with a disastrous conflict with Rome. It would lead to Jerusalem being destroyed, with death on a horrific scale.

Jesus recognized that the religious leaders had closed their hearts and closed their minds, and were pushing their people down the path to destruction. So he spoke to his followers to prepare them for all that was to come. He had warned them earlier about what would happen to him, how he would be condemned and put to death, but he trusted God to vindicate him on the other side of death. Now that the end was near, he warned them about what would happen to Judea and to Jerusalem. Our gospel reading for this morning is part of how Jesus tried to prepare his followers for the disaster that would come within a generation. He told them that when the crisis came, they should flee the city because it would become a death trap. He told them that they would face persecution from those who wanted to maintain the status quo. But God would give them strength and wisdom to face whatever came their way.

Then Jesus gave directions for how to live through the coming crisis, and his words hold wisdom for us just as they were for his first followers. For them, it was a bellicose religious nationalism that would lead to a failed revolt against with Rome, ending in the devastation of their homeland. Jesus told them how to find their way, how to live faithfully through the chaos. For us, there are any number of potential crises on the horizon—climate change, political extremism, the struggle for racial justice. There are wars and rumors of war. But Jesus's words can help us find our way through our time of trial as well. There are three main themes I hear in what Jesus said.

First, I notice that Jesus doesn't soft-peddle the fact that the world can be a truly scary place, a place where people might faint with fear and foreboding of what is coming. Jesus doesn't call us to some sort of naïve, sunny optimism that imagines everything is just fine. When life is chaotic or we are faced with serious challenges, it doesn't help to pretend otherwise. What

does help, and where Jesus' sense of hope comes from, is the awareness that God has not and will not abandon us, but instead is very much with us. We are not alone. God shares our pain and grief, which gives us strength. Because God is with us, and because God is entirely committed to God's creation, we can face what is fearful and not be paralyzed by it. Living with hope isn't living without fear. It is trusting that God is greater than the fear, and that God is faithful.

The second thing I notice is that Jesus is convinced that hope gives us tremendous freedom. When we have hope, we are not puppets whose strings can be pulled by the next news cycle or the next advertising blitz. When our hope is in God, who is at work for the healing of creation, we don't need to let ourselves be manipulated to want what everyone else wants, and fear what everyone else fears, and hate what everyone else hates. The political powers and the marketing powers and the media powers do not control who we are and how we choose to live. We can choose to live with compassion and forgiveness because we have experienced God's compassion and forgiveness, and we know how they give us life. We can choose to love our enemies and pray for them because Jesus has shown us how. We can choose to live with generosity and kindness because we are receiving God's generosity and kindness every minute of every day. When our lives are powered by hope, we can recognize the mess the world is in and still be strong enough and brave enough to choose love, to choose compassion instead of being defeated by fear, or attending only to our own self-interest. We are free to live as God's people in the world, to stand up and raise our heads, even while the rest of the world is fainting with foreboding.

The third thing I notice is that Jesus is convinced that the witness we give to his way of love matters for the world. That's why it's so important to not be weighed down by the worries of life, or numbed out with substances or shopping or TV. Instead, Jesus calls us, commands us, to be alert, to be fully present for life and looking for the signs of God at work in the world so that we can join in and be part of it. There is no one besides you who has your experience and your insights and your gifts, who is able to act with compassion and care in the way you are able. There is no one besides you who is able to embody the reign of God in your corner of the world, in the ways that you are able to do. There is no one besides you who can forgive those who have hurt you, or who can love your enemies. In your home, your work place, your circle of friends, you can embody faith that prioritizes compassion, that demonstrates love for the neighbor, that lifts up the lowly, that advocates for justice for all people, that is a beautiful reflection of God's love. Your witness matters to the world.

Dear people of God, on this Sunday after Thanksgiving, as the world around us turns to contemplate Christmas, with all of its gift-giving and social obligations, Jesus offers us something truly valuable. He offers us perspective. In the big picture of things, the one thing that matters is Jesus' way of love. There is so much trouble and pain in the world, but God has taken us up in an eternal embrace of love and forgiveness so that we can be the love that is healing for the pain. We can be a way forward through the trouble. We can see where God is already working for healing, and we can step up to be part of it. Thanks be to God. Amen.