

**Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 11/18/07**  
**St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York**  
**Text: Luke 21:5-19**

As we approach the end of the church year, our lectionary readings begin to center around the theme of the end times. Throughout Scripture, we come across texts that anticipate an end to our story - Listen again to the words from Malachi in our first reading: "See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch." Psalm 98 declares that the Lord will come to judge the earth in righteousness. These end times are described as a time of final judgment, of everything we know falling apart, and, in the New Testament, of the second coming of Christ.

Such passages tend to make us anxious. Generation after generation of people of faith have looked around, seen the mess that the world is in, and thought, "This has to be it. We must be approaching the end. Surely it can't get any worse than it is now."

In today's text from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' disciples wonder whether they're living in the end times when Jesus predicts the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and its extraordinary temple. His followers want to know exactly when this will happen and what they should expect beforehand. Jesus doesn't give them a date or time. He does describe what will lead up to it, including wars, natural disasters, and destruction; turmoil, betrayal, and persecution. These things do, in fact, occur. Carolyn West describes it this way:

*Less than forty years after Jesus spoke these words, his people would rebel against their Roman conquerors. Jesus foresaw this uprising, and its consequences, as inevitable. In 70 A.D., three Roman legions were sent to besiege the defiant city.*

*Starvation, disease, and relentless slaughter followed ...The city's walls were torn down and its buildings burned. The magnificent marble-and-gold temple was obliterated. The core of Jerusalem lay in ruins for at least thirty years, a ghost town where wild animals stalked through the ruins. The first Christians lived through this destruction, but Luke and his community ... were besieged by persecution for what they believed.\**

Today's Gospel text contains our tradition's teaching of Jesus regarding how those who follow him are to live when faced with challenges that shake the very foundation of their lives. It's applicable to us here and now, even if the war, natural disasters, and destruction that are taking place in our world right now don't have the immediate and direct impact on our lives that the fall of Jerusalem did on the lives of Jesus' earliest disciples. And it's relevant for us as Christians in America, even though being truly persecuted for our faith is unlikely.

Jesus says that we're to live faithfully. We're to testify to our faith. And we're not supposed to try to run the show or write the script. We're to trust that God will give us what we need, when we need it. We're not to live in fear.

Our Baptismal Covenant helps us, with specific guidelines about how to live faithfully as Christians. In grateful response to the presence and love of God in our own lives, we're to live faithfully by caring for those in need, and by showing kindness to friend and enemy alike. We're to live faithfully by being people of prayer, by sharing in the breaking of the bread, and by seeking to know and to abide by the teachings of Jesus.

We testify to our faith by declaring it publicly. That may mean handing out religious tracts in Times Square – but maybe not. I'm inspired and challenged by Roberta Bondi's description of what it means to her to testify to her faith. She writes, "I am going to testify to the truth of the Gospel: that because each person is of infinite value to God, no one has the right to withhold from anybody what they need for life. That wealth is not God's reward to the righteous or poverty God's punishment. That God's most particular concern is for the helpless, the poor, the struggling, the hopeless, and the outcast. That getting revenge on the personal or national level is wrong. And," she adds, "I should expect a lot of trouble for speaking out."\*\* We testify to our faith by bearing witness, through our words and our actions, to the value and dignity of every person and to the love, presence, and work of God in their midst and in ours.

We bear witness to our faith most effectively when we're paying close attention to the movement of the Spirit of God in the present moment, and that's where Jesus' warning not to run the show and write the script ourselves comes in. When we try to look ahead, anticipating from our own limited understanding exactly what God's plan must surely be and organizing ourselves and those around us accordingly, we're likely to miss what's right in front of us. How many times have we been busy doing with what we believe to be God's work, and an interruption occurs. We see the interruption as a distraction from what God has called us to do, and we push it aside, or deal with it quickly or half-heartedly, so that we can get back on track. It's only later that we realize that God's priority for us in that moment was, actually, the interruption itself.

Several years ago, my brother, Jay - at that time a hospital chaplain - shared his professional experience with me as I embarked on my own training in health care chaplaincy. Jay told me that he had established a spiritual discipline that he practiced before he entered each patient's room. He would pause for just a minute outside the door and ask God to show him how God was already at work in that person's life, so that Jay could then join God in that work. That practice helped Jay remember that the work of God is about God, and not about him. It helped Jay let go of any agenda that he might be carrying, consciously or not, that would interfere with his ability to be used by God in that situation. And it lifted from Jay the burden of feeling that it was up to him to bring the love and presence of God to these patients. In fact, God is already here.

God is already present and God is already at work – in the world and in our lives. It might look like the world as we know it, globally or personally, is falling apart right in

front of us, but God is here. And in these turbulent times, we're called to live faithfully and to testify to our faith. By God's grace and through God's power, we can do that, as we let go of our need to manipulate and control the means and the outcome. By God's grace and through God's power, we can trust that God will show us how God is already at work, in the world and in our lives, so that we might faithfully join God in that work. Amen.

\* Carolyn West, *Preaching Through the Year of Luke*, (edited by Roger Alling and David J. Schlafer; Morehouse Publishing, 2000).

\*\* Roberta Bondi, *The Christian Century*, November 2, 2004.

