

Wesley United Methodist Church

November 13, 2016

“Hope for the End Times.”

Luke 21:5-19

There is a story about a man named Luther Gilroy. Luther claimed he was out plowing his field and saw a sign in the sky that said THE END IS NEAR. So, Luther let his mule and his cow out of their pens, gave all his chickens away, and climbed on top of his house to await the end. When it didn't come, he pouted and refused to come down off the roof. Finally, his wife called the sheriff, who came over and said, “Luther, I saw that same sign. It didn't say, ‘The end is near,’ it said, ‘Go drink a beer.’ Now come down off that roof before you fall off and break your neck.”

From Jesus' day to the present people have speculated about when the world would end. Over the centuries people have made calculations and predictions, sold or given away all their belonging, and gathered at appointed paces to wait for the end of the world and for Jesus to return. Obviously, the world has not yet come to an end and Jesus has not returned.

Still, we wait. We look around at the world in which we live filled with violence and crime, and racial tension. We read about child abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, and we say, “Things just can't keep going on the way they're going.” Times of uncertainty and crisis trigger thoughts about the end of time. And people always want to know when.

Jesus and the disciples were in Jerusalem for what would be Jesus' last week on earth. It was a confusing time for the disciples. They thought that once they got to Jerusalem, great things would happen, and Jesus would establish his earthly kingdom. Things didn't turn out quite that way. Jesus had upset the religious officials and they were actively plotting against him.

It was in this time of confusion that the disciples were admiring the beauty of the Temple. The Temple had been restored some thirty years before and workers were still completing the detail work. The Temple could be seen from all directions as people approached Jerusalem. The outside of the building was covered with so much gold that an onlooker could scarcely look directly at it in bright sunlight. As the disciples admire the Temple, Jesus told them, “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another, all will be torn down.” “Unthinkable!” thought his disciples, the Temple was built for all generations and would never be destroyed. Yet Jesus told them that one day the beautiful Temple would be nothing more than rubble. The disciples asked the question that has been on the lips of every generation since, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” The disciples wanted to know when their world was going to crumble.

“Beware,” said Jesus, “that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and ‘the time is near!’ “Do not go after them.” Jesus did not want his followers to become too preoccupied with thoughts of the future. He did not want them to be led astray by persons who make meaningless calculations. He didn't want them to be paralyzed with fear.

“When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first,” Jesus told them. “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful events and great signs from heaven.” This will be a time of trial, Jesus tells his disciples, and they will not be exempt. But neither will they be alone.

In times of need, Jesus promises them, you will receive strength from beyond. Rabbi Harold Kushner reflects on this strength. “I have seen weak people become strong,” he writes, “timid people become brave, selfish people become generous. I have seen people care for their elderly parents, for brain damaged children, for wives (or husbands) in wheelchairs, even decades, and I have asked myself, where do people get their strength to keep doing that for so long? Where do they get the resources of love and loyalty to keep going? The only answer I come up with is when we are weary and out of strength, we turn to God and God renews our strength, so we can run and not grow weary, so that we can walk and not feel faint.”

In times of persecution, in times of suffering, in times when our world seems to be crumbling, in times of our greatest need, we will receive strength from beyond ourselves. That strength comes from God. Jesus warns the disciples that the days ahead will be difficult. But they are not alone. And neither are we. Because he is with us, we can carry on even when the world around us is falling to pieces. There were times in the disciples' lives when everything seemed to go wrong. People rejected their messages. Some even tried to kill them. There were times when they did their very best and no one responded. Sometimes they were run out of town. Being a follower of Jesus required patience and endurance. It still does. Again, I want to quote the words of Bishop Karen: “If you are going to be a follower of Jesus, you had better look good on wood.”

Where do we get the ability to keep going even when everything appears to be going wrong? From God and God alone. We persevere.

However, followers are not to sit by and do nothing while waiting for Christ's return. While we wait, we have work to do. What kind of work? All kinds of "work" loving work, encouraging work. Let me give you an example.

Douglas Maurer, fifteen, of Creve Coeur, Missouri, had been feeling bad for several days. His temperature was ranging between 103 and 105 degrees, and he was suffering flu-like symptoms. His mother, Donna, took him to the emergency room where blood tests revealed one of the most agonizing things a parent can learn about a child. Douglas was diagnosed with leukemia.

During the next 48 hours, Douglas endured blood transfusions, spine and bone marrow tests and chemotherapy. For five days, his mother stayed in his hospital room. The doctors were frank about his disease. They told him that for the next three years he would have to undergo chemotherapy. They told Douglas that he would go bald, and that his body would most likely bloat. Upon learning this, he went into a deep depression.

On his first day in the hospital he said to his mother, "I thought you get flowers when you're in the hospital." One of his aunts called Brix Florist in St Louis. His aunt wanted the sales clerk to be aware of the flower arrangement's significance. "I want the planter to be especially attractive. It's for my teenage nephew who has leukemia," she told the clerk. "Oh," said the sales clerk, "let's add some fresh-cut flowers to brighten it up."

When the floral arrangement arrived, it was beautiful. Douglas opened the envelope and read the card from his aunt. Then he saw another card. The second card read: "Douglas, I took your order. I work at Brix Florist. I had leukemia when I was seven years old. I'm 22 years old now. Good luck. My heart goes out to you. Sincerely, Laura Bradley."

Douglas' face lit up. His mother said, "For the first time since he had been in the hospital, he had gotten some inspiration. He had talked to so many doctors and nurses. By this one card, from the woman at the florist who had survived leukemia, was the thing that made him believe he might beat the disease." Often it is little extra things that we do that makes the difference. Loving things, encouraging things. Whether the world comes to an end today or billions of years from now, we want to be found not sitting on a roof-top looking up into the sky, but ministering to all God's children. And he called us to do it in his name. Amen.