

**Apocalypse Now?
Luke 21: 5-19
Don Lincoln**

Twenty years ago, the world was staring into an abyss of catastrophic proportions. There were threats of global chaos. World markets would collapse in disarray. Mass transit would stop in its tracks. Cash registers would not ring a sale. Credit cards? Useless. Air traffic control...would be out of control.

It was Y2K – the year 2000 was upon us. Everyone faced the stroke of midnight on December 31st holding their breath, even if just for a moment. All because the computer systems to which we had sold our souls were not designed to recognize a new century.

12:01 arrived, and as each time zone entered the new millennium, the global sigh of relief gained momentum across the globe. Before long we were laughing – at ourselves, at the panic some had felt, at the worry that had consumed us.

Our passage from the Gospel – known as the “little apocalypse” in Luke – foretells catastrophic events. Jesus is teaching in the temple, and the disciples are distracted.¹ Distracted by all they saw around them.

Even though Jesus and his followers are looking at the same temple, they do not see the same thing. What the disciples see is an architectural marvel. But it's also the biggest, boldest, and most unshakeable symbol of God's presence they're capable of imagining.

For them, the massive stones of the temple hold religious memory. They bolster a colonized people's identity. They offer the faithful a potent symbol of spiritual glory, pride, and worthiness. In short, what takes the followers' breath away as they gaze at the temple is the religious certainty and permanence those glittering stones display to the world.

That's what Jesus' disciples see. But what does Jesus see? He sees ruins. Rubble. Destruction. Fragility, not permanence. Loss, not glory. Change, not stasis. Jesus sees all that must break and buckle and end before new life and new hope will emerge. He sees the necessity of death before the promise of resurrection.² New birth in an old life.

All of us know people who dismiss gloom and doom predictions with a wave of their hand and a dismissive, “I don't believe that stuff; I'm not worried about anything.” They describe prophetic predictors of coming disaster as chicken little's: “The sky is falling, the sky is falling.”

All of us also know folks at the other extreme, who are not only deadly serious about, but seem consumed by disasters over the horizon. They consider naysayers to be head-in-the-sand, self-centered fools who care nothing about future generations, or the signs they say are visible everywhere. For most things – these say it's already too late.

Doom and gloom is an ancient rubric, as is the rose-colored glasses syndrome. An example of the latter is the countless thinkers, including theologians, who following World War I said that never again would the world face such horrors – that we had learned – and that humanity would rebound in unity and respect. We know how long that lasted.

On the other hand, I remember in 1979 taking my youth group to see the movie “War Games” with Matthew Broderick – about a computer simulation gone awry that fooled the Defense Department into thinking the Soviet Union had launched missiles at the United States. I was aghast to discover in our discussion after the movie that every one of the 40 kids in my youth group believed they would die in a nuclear holocaust before they reached the age of 35. Those kids are all over 50 now.

Earlier this year, Bill Wilson, our consultant in the Vision process in 2018, wrote about doomsday predictions for the church. “Have you noticed,” he writes, “that the bandwagon of those predicting the imminent demise of the Christian church in this country is filled to capacity?”

You have to admit, the numbers do not look good in most places. Denominations regularly report widespread decline. ‘Spiritual but not religious’ is the fastest growing segment of American religious life. Thousands of congregations close annually. Mega churches report the vast majority of their growth mostly happens by attracting members from other churches. The prevailing opinion on the viability of church and its life in America is grim and gloomy.”³

But Bill offers a minority opinion. “I believe there has never been a better day to be the church; never been a richer opportunity, a more compelling need, or a more invigorating challenge than what is before us. I believe the 21st century will find the church of Jesus Christ emerging from decades of slow decline to rediscover authentic community, witness to the truth necessary for the day, and a vibrancy it hasn't seen in decades.

Bill does not know how. No one does. But he believes it will happen. Because he believes Jesus told the truth about His church enduring forever, because of church history, and because of what he knows about local churches and the people in them today.

Bill cites an article entitled “*Gloomy predictions overlook change*”, in which the author noted, for instance, recent developments in the world oil supply have debunked the notion the human race will eventually deplete the supply of oil and civilization will grind to a screeching halt. The article says: “It is not uncommon to hear reports that say if something continues on its current path, the result will be disaster. What these reports do, is take a current trend and extrapolate it into the future to arrive at their devastating conclusion.”

The author of the article says it reminds her of the Great Horse Manure Crisis of 1894. The primary form of transportation at the turn of the 19th century was by horse. Population in large cities was doubling; and the need for horses pulling cabs and buses had tripled. The streets of London and New York began to fill with their odiferous byproduct of the transportation system. In 1894, a writer for the Times of London predicted that in 50 years every street in London would be buried under 9 feet of manure.

Doomsday scenarios usually overlook one vital truth: **things can change**. Those who make straight-line projections about the future fail to account for the innovation, creativity and God-inspired change you and I cannot see from where we stand today. As happens, necessity bred innovation, and horses were replaced by motor vehicles.”

But motor vehicles didn't drop out of the sky in the early 20th century. They came about because entrepreneurs and inventors painstakingly tried and failed with hundreds of ideas. Bill Wilson says in response to that, “The same will be true for the new life that our churches must and will embrace. It will come one step at a time, it will involve change, and pain and failure, and it will require most of all a spirit of humility among all of us.”

But friends – it's not just the preservation of the church (or the temple) that should concern us. It is the betterment of the world, for which the church bears responsibility, that you and I should be listening to Jesus, paying attention to Jesus, being open to the change that Jesus commends us to foster, so humanity might grow closer to God's desired kingdom. Ever more close day by day.

Gus Speth, the dean of Forestry at Yale University, recently spoke to a group of religious leaders.

He said, “I used to think the top environmental problems facing the world were climate change, environmental degradation and eco-system collapse, and that we scientists could fix those problems with enough science. But I was wrong. The real problem is not those three things, but rather greed, selfishness and apathy. And for that we need a spiritual and cultural transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that. We need the help of you religious leaders and your faith communities.”

Greed, selfishness, and apathy. Science knows how to halt climate change and protect eco-systems. But there are powerful interests driven by greed and selfishness that are unwilling to tolerate any changes that might cost them or us anything in diminished profits, or in limiting our daily comforts and convenience.

Jesus tells His disciples in their day – and us in our day – what it is we are to do in these times, in these circumstances. And He promises He will give us what is critical – what we need in these times. Wisdom and a mouth. “ I will give you the wisdom you need and the mouth to speak.”

“Don't let anyone deceive you,” Jesus says. Don't let anybody take you in. Times such as these will give you a chance to do what you are called to do – to testify – to bear witness to

the truth. I will give you the wisdom you need don't worry about coming up with it. I will give you the words you need in those moments. You will keep your lives, your souls, the very being that God blessed you with by your patient endurance in this season.

I said this passage is called the "Little Apocalypse." An apocalypse is an unveiling; a disclosure of something secret and hidden. To experience an apocalypse is to experience fresh sight. Honest disclosure. Accurate revelation. It is to apprehend reality as we've never apprehended it before.

Of the church, Bill Wilson says, "This is no time to relax or give into the temptation to dismiss the facts with a naïve belief that all will work out for good. Every congregation needs to take a fearless look at itself and admit that its future is grim without significant God-inspired inspiration, and innovation, and retooling. Fear may be your starting point for change, but it must soon give way to God-inspired hope and hard work if you are to endure." "A reality check," he writes.

Like Bill says to the church, this text calls to me and to us in these times in this world, to be truth-tellers. Not naysayers; nor panicked in fear. We are to give testimony to what we know to be the truth as God gives it. As individuals and as a congregation. And you and I give testimony by our loving God and loving every neighbor. We give testimony by our standing up and our speaking up for what is right; we give testimony by our attitudes of hospitality and acceptance for those outside our immediate circle; we give testimony by our direct aid to those who are in need; we give testimony by our care of and for the earth; and by using our influence to change the structures of society that create injustice.

Because we know God-inspired change **can happen**. It may be hard; it may be unwelcome in some corners. Jesus said, "You may be hated for giving testimony to me and what I call this world to." But we know change can happen. And just as the disciples realized why the temple fell, you and I know some of the temples in which we have come to believe need to be torn down too. Like the idea the planet doesn't need our care. Or that systemic racism will pass away on its own eventually and for now it just is what it is. Or the myth that the status quo is the best we can come up with.

You and I are to bear witness that this world and everyone in it belongs to God. And God isn't finished with it. Isn't finished redeeming it; isn't finished repurposing it, isn't finished repairing it, isn't finished renewing it.

In the troubling context of these days, it is easy to despair. Or to grow numb. Or to let exhaustion win. But it's precisely now, **NOW** when the world around us feels the most apocalyptic, that you and I must respond with resilience, courage, and a truthful, unflinching witness. It's precisely now, when systemic evil and age old brokenness threaten to bring us to ruin that we must testify without fear and without shame to the Good News that is the Gospel. God is making all things new. Tearing down old temples to make way for new life.

And to trust that what's happening in the church and in the world is not so much death, but birth. Yes, the birth pangs hurt, sometimes mightily as a lot of you know all too well. But scripture promises with God as our midwife, what God brings to birth never leads to desolation. Sometimes we may find ourselves standing in the ruins to bear witness, but rest assured: these birth pangs promise the joy of God is still coming.

So friends, take heart. Have faith. Hold fast. Testify to what the spirit tells you is true, do the necessary work – all of us – that by our endurance, we and the world in which we live will gain the lives that God holds out as God's promise before us. God is still God, and Lord over all. Thanks be to God. AMEN.

1. Patrick Wilson, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Proper 28.
2. Debi Thomas, JourneywithJesus.net, November 17, 2019.
3. Bill Wilson, "What the Gloomy Predictions About the Church Overlook;" Center for Healthy Churches, June 25, 2019.