

## SIGNS OF THE TIMES?

Luke 21:5-19

From Tony Campolo, “My wife and I were returning from New Zealand after a preaching mission, and we stopped in Honolulu to take a break from the long trip. We got off the plane with plans to catch another one on to Los Angeles some five hours later. In the meantime, we headed into the city and took a walk along Waikiki Beach. As we strolled along, we came upon a very strange looking man standing with a Bible in one hand and waiving his finger at every passerby with the other. He was barefoot and wearing a dirty T- shirt and tattered trousers. To everyone who passed he pronounced the judgment of God on those who would not accept Christ.

As we passed him, I said to my wife, “It’s guys like that who are an embarrassment to the Kingdom of God. People look at weirdos like that and get turned off to the gospel. Guys like that leave me a bit disgusted.

An hour or so later we were heading back to catch the bus to the airport, and we came upon this same man. To my surprise, there were two very normal looking, properly dressed men standing with him. He had his arms around their shoulders, and as I passed, I could hear that they were saying a prayer, surrendering their lives to Christ. My wife looked at me and simply asked, “Well? How many people did you lead to Jesus today?”

According to Tony, witnessing is an obligation for every Christian. And though we may seem foolish to others, it is through “the foolishness of preaching,” says the apostle Paul that the gospel gets out into the world.

Do any of you here this morning believe that we are living in the end times? By definition “End Times” is a future time-period described variously in the eschatologies of several world religions, which teach that world events will reach a final climax. The word eschatology refers to the part of theology concerned with the final events of history, or the ultimate destiny of humanity. This concept is commonly referred to as the “end of the world” or “end times”. Once again, you don’t need to show your hand, a simple nod will do – do any of you believe that we are living in the end times? Well, in many ways you are in good company. Every generation at some time in its history, has thought its time was the end of time – and the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been no exception. Starting with Jesus’ very disciples who believed that his return was imminent, all the way to this present day, every generation can point to experiences of war, natural disasters, and political chaos as signs of the times. I want to strongly caution you on becoming overly focused on this – unless it leads you to become more proactive in bringing people to Christ. More on this later.

In our Scripture lesson for this morning it appears that Jesus is giving a direct prophecy of the end times verse 10ff, “Nations and kingdoms will fight against each other. There will be great earthquakes and wide-scale food shortages and epidemics. There will also be terrifying sights and great signs in the sky. Before all this occurs, they will take you into custody and harass you because of your faith.” Jesus assures the disciples the end times are in the future and will not

happen all at once. And here Jesus says something quite interesting, “This will give you an opportunity to testify.”

What kind of testimony does Jesus advise his disciples to present? Well, he is quite clear these testimonies must not be “canned,” or rehearsed – the Holy Spirit will give you the words you need at the time. Jesus also is prompting the disciples to ponder what it might be like to give testimony in the midst of suffering and persecution. What kind of testimony does a faithful person give in the face of death, betrayal, and the execution of loved ones? (Feasting, year C, volume 4, page 310) Most of us are accustomed to testimonies that praise God for the good times, good things, blessings of redemption, healing, rescue and salvation. Testimonies are usually reserved for the stories that declare how God brought the faithful out of slavery into freedom, how God made a way when there was no way. These peculiar words of Jesus in this passage, however, tell us that when we experience destruction, betrayal and loss, we are to see these times as opportunities to testify.

The following was found in the clothing of a dead child at Ravensbruck concentration camp. “Remember, O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But, do not remember all of the suffering they have inflicted upon us; instead, remember the fruits we have borne because of this suffering – our fellowship, our loyalty to one another, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart that has grown from this trouble. When our persecutors come to be judged by you, let all of these fruits that we have borne be our forgiveness.”

“Suffering always means pain, disruption, separation and incompleteness”, writes Shawn Copeland. “It can render us powerless and mute, push us to the borders of hopelessness and despair. The opportunity to testify during times of destruction is, in part, the audacity to muster courage in the face of fear, the boldness to speak in the face of suffering. Great suffering changes some people and defeats others, but those who endure – their very souls are gained.” (Feasting on the Word, page 310)

These words of Jesus were meant to give his disciples opportunity. Opportunity to find the peace that passes all understanding because even in the midst of things falling apart around us, Jesus remains in the very center. He told us the truth of what was coming so we could have peace. It’s the kind of peace a child has when his father warns him ahead of time that thunder is coming or that the road is getting bumpy. It’s the kind of peace that says to your soul, “Even though you have to endure, you’re going to get through it.” It’s the kind of peace produced by the fact that when trouble *does* arrive, it proves only that Jesus is surprised by nothing and therefore capable of everything.

Jesus’ words also give us the unique position of helping others during and through these times. He tells us that as this broken world increasingly shows itself for what it is, in the form of all kinds of strife, struggle and persecution, those disciples standing in the midst of it will be afforded the chance to share with their friends, their families and even their enemies just why this world is so broken (sin) and just who (Jesus) has made and will make it all better. This indeed is the best way to respond to tales of the ‘end times.’

Unfortunately, there are those who become so focused on the literal reading of these words that they become obsessed with the signs of the times. Understanding that this world will, at some point, crumble, we stare at the news, take note of all the troubles in our relationships and look for the straw that will break the eschatological camel's back. The thinking is that if we do so, we can help avoid some of the pain and struggle that Jesus says come with the territory of living in a world that's quickly deteriorating. So we do things such as read books about people being "left behind," watch TV preachers who draw straight lines from current events to Old Testament prophecies and place labels on whatever "evil" politician or slimy celebrity we think is hastening this world's demise.

But today's text says the heart of such obsession isn't obedience to Jesus' directives. No, instead it's all about fear. (Homiletics Online, 11/14/2010).

Jesus' goal in getting his disciples, in getting us, ready for the end is to produce a peace in us that understands that despite chaos, God's plan is moving on. Worldwide struggle doesn't mean the world is outside of his divine control. In fact, Jesus wants us to see such "fearful" events as signs of God's activity in bringing things to a joyful conclusion. Obsession is driven by fear to store up canned goods and invest in gold. Awareness, however, is looking around — seeing all that our Savior said was coming to pass — and being motivated by our peace to share the good news that God's plan is taking place. Such awareness will keep us from being distracted out of apathy or building a fort out of obsession. Instead, we will hug people we love, pray for those who persecute us and perhaps do something hopeful, such as plant a tree. Why? Because our good God is bringing about his promised good end. (Homiletics Online, 2010) And oh, by the way. Please don't listen to any person trying to give you a target date for when Christ will return. Listen instead to these words from the Gospel of Mark: "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will never pass away. But as for that day or hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

A closing story. An opportunity for testimony, born out of a time of loss, grief and chaos is recorded in the song "Precious Lord," written by Thomas Dorsey. Thomas Dorsey was a prolific songwriter and excellent gospel and blues musician. Born in rural Georgia, Dorsey moved to Chicago and found work as a piano player in the churches as well as the clubs and playing in theatres. Eventually, he played exclusively in churches.

In August of 1932, Dorsey left his pregnant wife in Chicago and traveling to be the featured soloist at a large revival meeting in St. Louis. After the first night of the revival, Dorsey received a telegram that simply said, "Your wife just died." Dorsey raced home and learned that his wife had given birth to a son before dying in childbirth. The next day his son died as well. Dorsey buried his wife and son and withdrew in sorrow and agony from his family and friends. He refused to compose or play any music for quite some time.

While still in the midst of despair, Dorsey said that as he sat in front of a piano, a feeling of peace washed through him. He heard a melody in his head that he had never heard before and began to play it on the piano. That night Dorsey recorded this testimony while in the midst of suffering:

Precious Lord, take my hand,  
Lead me on, let me stand;  
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;  
Through the storm, through the night,  
Lead me on to the light;  
Take my hand, precious Lord,  
Lead me home.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!