

ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE KIN-DOM OF GOD

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Our Scripture Lesson today finds Jesus in the middle of what I like to call “Temple Trouble.”

It is the last week of his life. Probably Wednesday. He has already entered Jerusalem triumphantly and taught in the temple to great acclaim.

But he cannot help confronting the idolatry of it all, at the expense of what he calls “the least of these.” To the point of getting in the faces of the money changers in the temple and tossing their tables in a fit of righteous anger.

Things have calmed down a bit since then. By the time we get to our lesson a day or two has passed. But Jesus still has more to say ...

Luke 21:5-19

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” And he said, “Beware 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.

“When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.” Then he said to 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 portents and great signs from heaven.

“But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

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We have only been together four weeks as pastor and people, but I have already been drawn in to the temptation of “Temple Trouble.”

It began with a sly invitation in the Worship Committee to debate the theological merits of replacing the cross with images of angels during the upcoming season of Advent.

I politely declined.

“No major changes,” I said. “We’ll do what we’ve always done ... for now.”

And so there shall be angels in Advent, which for you is normal, and for me is new ... but I like it! Imagine, however, how the Worship Committee would have responded – how *you* would have responded – if I had answered in the way of Jesus in our Scripture lesson for today, as the people oooh and aaaaaah over the “beautiful stones and gifts” of the first century Temple in Jerusalem.

What if I had said, “As for the cross and the angels, these pews and this sanctuary, this organ, the days will come when every bit of it will be underwater. When glaciers have melted and sea levels have risen and the

valley of the Potomac River has flooded. And humankind can no longer breathe because the levels of carbon monoxide in the air have surpassed our capacity to compensate”?

Would you see me as a Dooms-dayer? A Truth-teller? A Debate-evader?

A Faithful Preacher?

The truth is I have not yet researched how climate change will affect this region of the country or our congregation in particular.

I do know – or at least the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change of the United Nations warns, in their own version of a “dreadful portent and great sign from heaven” – this apocalyptic scenario is pretty much guaranteed for the Ebon Atoll Presbyterian Church of the Marshall Islands and the St. Andrews Presbyterian Church of Fiji and even the First Presbyterian Church of Miami.

The question is ... what do we do about it?

In practical terms, I have learned, SPC has already done quite a bit. Most recently in the solar panel project, first of its kind in the state of West Virginia.

The University, I have learned, has hosted lectures on the subject. Numerous action groups have formed in the region.

One of our own, I have learned, currently walks the nation of Denmark raising awareness about the environmental impact of an insulation plant right here in Jefferson County.

All of that is good. And necessary.

What I want to address today, though, is the *foundation* of all of that work, at least in the words of scientist Gus Speth:

“I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address those problems. But I was wrong.

The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy ... and to deal with those we need a spiritual and cultural transformation - and we scientists don't know how to do that.”

A spiritual and cultural transformation, he says, to address the environmental problems of selfishness, greed, and apathy ...

Or, as Jesus puts it, “by your endurance you will gain your souls.”

It is what he has preached from the beginning, in a sense. The words we read in our English translation being “repent for the kingdom of God is at hand.” Which I would update for our times to mean: “change your hearts and minds – change your *lives* – in order to live as the family of God.”

Live “as if” Jesus says, that peaceable kingdom, that beloved community, that “Great Shalom” is already here.

And he proceeds to feed people and to heal people and to encourage others to feed people and heal people, all in the name of this beloved community, this family, this “kin-dom” (if you will) of God.

And you would think he would get praise for that. The gratitude of the people. And a really nice pension to retire along the shores of Galilee with ...

Instead he gets a cross. Just two days later. Because of Temple Trouble.

The powers that be know full well that building the beloved community, that living as the kin-dom of God, means tearing down everything they have spent their lives – and their livelihoods – defending. And they are afraid.

As is the case with climate change.

Scientists on that Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change tell us our entire way of life will need to adapt – and quickly – if we are to mitigate the worst that is to come for the Ebon Atoll Presbyterian Church of the Marshall Islands, for the St. Andrews Presbyterian Church of Fiji, for the First Presbyterian Church of Miami, for the beloved community that is the very kin-dom of God.

We need to stop fossil fuel production NOW. We need to stop driving cars fueled by gasoline NOW. We need to stop using plastic NOW. We need to stop food waste NOW. We need to stop creating more trash-filled landfills NOW.

In short, we need to repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.

The problem is, I do not think we will. At least not enough of us. At least not in time.

The problem is, the cross is coming soon for our brothers and sisters in Christ, - our brothers and sisters of every religion – in the Marshall Islands, in Fiji, in Miami. And like the women who follow Jesus in Luke's Gospel, I feel powerless to stop it.

I am afraid there will be wars and insurrections, as climate refugees clamor at our borders. I am afraid there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues. We may very well lose our own beautiful bricks and cross and angels, here at SPC.

But about those angels ...

About those "messengers of God," which is what the word "angel" means.

Over and over, throughout our Scriptures, when the angels appear, the first words they say are, "Be Not Afraid!"

Over and over again in our Scriptures, the angels show up just when all hope seems lost. When selfishness and greed and apathy are winning.

And they say, "Congratulations! God is choosing YOU! You get to remind the people that God's eye is on the sparrow, and yes, God watches over the Ebon Atoll Presbyterian Church of the Marshall Islands. And you get to persuade the people to change their way of life, in order to live as the family of God."

And my guess is that those angels in Advent will tell us that God is calling us to align ourselves in solidarity with those who suffer the worst in the coming crisis. And that will give us strength to endure. And that maybe, just maybe, we will gain our souls in the process.

And what an "Advent" that would be!

Amen.