

There is a coin being flipped in the reading of Holy Scripture this morning. It seems like heads is great anticipation and hope and tails is despair and doom. But I don't think this choice is as cut and dry as it sounds. We know that contained within the mystery of faith there is both life and death, victory being snatched out of the jaws of defeat. Over the long haul, despite how the math *should* shake out, despite the certainty of mathematical probability, the coin tosses finally bear out a path forward into hope and joy. We have the hope of a new heaven and a new earth, but the reality of the broken body of someone we love, even just their ashes laid out before us... just go to any funeral and hear the words proclaimed in spite of the grim reality before us.

Despite the evidence that death seems to have won, we engage with the reality of our mortality and face it with words that seem to say something radically otherwise, "For so did you ordain when you created me saying, 'You are dust and to dust you shall return.' All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia." Yet on the Monday after the funeral how do we pick up the broken pieces of our lives and move on?

There are a couple of trajectories we can move along when we encounter apocalyptic texts like the ones, we read this morning. One reading, an increasingly popular one is that of a linear history rapidly coming toward its final horizon with these texts delivering descriptions of what to look for as we are speeding toward the end of the world. There is another sense that these texts are describing challenges that each generation faces as it comes into its own and is faced with the disappointments and challenges, and widespread catastrophes of their time. I want to give more weight to this latter interpretive framework, though it seems like we ought to include some overlap considering the nature of the challenges we face.

Let's look first at our passage from Isaiah. This is a prophecy for the in-between times as Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis puts it. Late in the 6th century BCE, exiled Judeans were allowed to return to Jerusalem by the decree of Cyrus the Persian. What they discover when they return is thoroughly demoralizing and heartbreaking. The city had not been rebuilt to the extent that they were promised. The poetry of this section of Isaiah offers a truly mixed bag of grave accusations of disloyalty and high praises of hope for the future. The prophecy is addressing a people milling about in deep despair and on the best day of the week are able to ask themselves, "Well, now what?" And the now what is not waiting, but actively praying, voicing the deepest concerns and desires of the heart to God. Isaiah calls the fervent prayers of the people, "Watchmen" in metaphorical language to hold God accountable to paying attention to this situation. And today in chapter 65, we hear a response.

We can look toward that horizon in the future that says somehow, sometime God will make this right, perhaps as the writer of Revelation did, perhaps as we hope to see those tears wiped away from every eye. But there is a sense that God is speaking directly into that in-between situation of those returning to a devastated homeland, to a neighborhood in ruin, and saying because you are continually engaged in a dynamic relationship with me, and because you routinely try and utilize holy imagination, this place is going to be different from now on. IT can be different from now on. Just like Jesus last week speaking blessing into existence, God meets us in the in-between time, when we are disappointed, when the mountain is on fire and we are grieving the death of a three-year-old, when the country is torn apart at the seams and we can't even talk about it with our neighbors, when everybody is sick... God says I am about to...

And when God says I'm about to, I want to get excited. Just like you are in that gap between despair and anticipation at what seems like the end of the world, God says, I'm about to, I'm fixin to, I am about to make a new heaven and new earth, and it is better than the one that you have imagined where only people like you belong. And we aren't going to tolerate weeping and the sound of screams, this won't be a place where kids die before they have lived a long full life, where there's not enough housing or food to eat... I'm about to do this, I'm fixin' to...

This kind of expansive apocalyptic language can really get you down if you don't come to it the right way. On one level, it looks like God failed even in a purely historical sense, the people who came back and found a ruined Jerusalem built it back, built the temple back and almost 600 years later, after being subjugated again by the Romans, had the temple destroyed again. But apocalyptic literature is not just about what is going on, like reading the newspaper. On another level apocalyptic literature mixes what is going on with what is really going on, that is historical reality stretched out and measured against the reality of God's purposes. And all of that is laced with some symbolic and mysterious figures of speech. But more than a roadmap to the end, it is a witness to the faithful tenacity of the people of God. When disaster seems immanent, and there is no hope from disaster, faithful people turn their face toward God not in desperation, but for a vision of what will be the true end of our present apocalypse and the beginning of a new age to come.

Jesus knew this cycle really well. He is getting to the end of his ministry. He knows his time is coming. He is in Jerusalem. And there are people standing around, unaware apparently of the swirling cloud of disaster just on the periphery of personal tragedy, national despair, and the shattering of hope. Already the wheels are in motion for a trap to be sprung, for Jesus to be betrayed, for the momentum of another political liberator, a messiah to be silenced, and the precious temple to be destroyed again in the wake of local insurrection. But for now, there are some hanging around in wilful ignorance, or perhaps just taking a break from the bad news and admiring the temple. Jesus reminds them that they will recognize the trouble when it comes, it will be undeniable, the evidence will be their broken hearts just as the temple is broken down in front of them. They won't need conspiracy theories to make sense of it.

Just 600 years before, this was all happening. Memories fade, time marches on.. we want to forget. But Jesus recalls these events, not just for assurance that this has all happened before and you will weather the storm as well as your ancestors did... although I think that is part of it.. The key to his message is that we are all still in the in-between time, when what matters more is tenacious faithful response to the demands of the Gospel in our present time and our present challenges, "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."

There is no special persecution, or secret apocalypse or rapture saving us out of the suffering we are experiencing. Jesus says, "By your endurance you will gain your souls." Well, just like the people who came back to Jerusalem in ruins 600 year before, just like the people trying to distract themselves from the inevitable conflict coming, just like us now who have read, marked and inwardly digested the promises of God and are still trying to extinguish wildfire up on the mountain and raging even in our own hearts, just like people who have to get up on the day after

a dear one's funeral we say, "Well, now what?" Maybe it worked for people in centuries past who God talked to directly, and maybe it can work for people who actually hung out with Jesus, but what about us? It seems like too much to go through...

We read through half of Luke chapter 21 this morning, and Jesus has a few more sobering warnings to tell us in grand apocalyptic style. But when it comes to the next chapter, when it comes to creating that solid bond with those living through the in-between time, who know the way things are supposed to be, live the best lives they can to help whoever they can and it's not enough for things to look like the new Jerusalem, it doesn't look like the new Warren County coming down from heaven around here to me, does it to you?

This is what Jesus does to reassure and to invite over and over again his people into dynamic relationship to remind people about what God is fixin to do in the long arc of history, in our town, in your family, in your heart, what God is fixin to do is sit down at table with us.

In Luke chapter 22, after the apocalyptic visions of Jesus, the gospel tells us, "When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.'" Jesus calls his friends into relationship and communion with himself. And that is how we will weather the changes and chances of this life. We will shelter in this indestructible temple, and go out even to the grave singing our song as we work for the making of the not-yet into our world that is already being changed.
AMEN.