



## SERMONS THAT WORK

**Pentecost 23  
Proper 28 (C)**

**Apocalypse!  
[RCL] Isaiah 65:17-25; Canticle 9; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19**

In just a couple of weeks, we will send the Gospel of Luke to the barn and saddle up the Gospel of Matthew, as we inaugurate Advent and turn the liturgical calendar from Year C to Year A. When we do, there will surely be more than a few preachers who will breathe a weary sigh of relief—more than a little ready for something other than the shrill, apocalyptic imagery we have been hearing for weeks.

Spoiler alert: Advent arrives with its own apocalyptic punch!

The text before us today features Luke narrating Jesus' description of the end of days, complete with earthquakes, famines, wars, plagues, and persecution of the faithful. This is the kind of apocalyptic language that made the *Left Behind* series famous in some Christian communities—reminding us, once again, that there is a lot of money to be made by selling fear to Christians.

But did you catch where Jesus is standing as he's describing what is to come? He's in the Temple! And not only that, Luke tells us that the disciples were marveling at the beauty of the Temple—its enormous stone walls and fine metal fixtures and wealthy worshippers who came to make their gifts.

The New Testament may remember Herod as a paranoid despot, but historians and archaeologists remember him as a builder—and the Temple was the jewel in Herod's architectural crown.

People couldn't help but notice the Temple and its fineries. The disciples noticed; everyone noticed! And Jesus noticed them noticing. So, he says, "Take a good long look at these enormous, beautiful stones. Notice the masonry and the artistry. At the end of days, not one of these stones will be left upon the other; all will be thrown down."

We can almost hear the disciples whispering to one another. "How can this be? This place is indestructible! It's a fortress! It'll last thousands of years!" And yet, although the disciples didn't know it at the time, Luke knew just how true Jesus' words were. By the year 70, all that would be left of Herod's Temple was a pile of rubble.

The same fate would befall the Roman Empire and the Ottoman Empire after it, and the British Empire after it. Buildings that shaped humankind's existence, buildings that were made to last far longer than any single

generation, all met the same fate. Even the temple that Jesus was standing in and speaking of—the one that nearly everyone in the ancient world marveled after—was the second temple constructed on that site. The Babylonians destroyed the first one five hundred years earlier.

Wars, insurrections, earthquakes, famines, plagues, the destruction of the very places that enrich our lives, all these things, Jesus says, will come to pass in the last days. And just when we think it can't possibly get any worse than that, Jesus gets personal: You will be arrested; you will be persecuted; you will be thrown into prison and hauled before the court.

Then notice what he says next: Just when everything is shrouded in darkness; when lies have taken the place of truth; when war seems inevitable and eternal; when the earth trembles beneath you—then you will have the opportunity to testify!

Now, if we're honest with ourselves, most of us hear that and think, "You've got to be kidding me!" After all, what can you or I say in the face of wars and earthquakes and famines? And more to the point, arrests and persecutions and court proceedings exist precisely to keep people from speaking and acting in ways that society deems objectionable.

But Jesus says, "I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict." He then goes on to say this: "Not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance, you will gain your souls."

When all hell is breaking loose in the world around us, we may want to pull the covers over our heads or lay low and hope nobody notices us. But Jesus calls us to do just the opposite: Speak up! Tell the truth! Proclaim Christ crucified and risen!

Amidst all the apocalyptic language we hear in Luke's Gospel, Jesus is teaching us something essential about what it means to be his followers. When things get hard; when people point their pitchforks at you; when people try to silence and malign and ridicule you, keep on speaking! Keep on telling the world about Jesus! Keep on telling the truth!

This is the essential vocation of the Church: to stand tall in the middle of the chaos and confusion of the world and keep hitting the same pitch so we can tune our ears: This is who we are. This is what we're about. Over and over again.

God is faithful even when everything around us is falling apart. Our job is to keep telling that truth—to keep living that truth—because when all is said and done, it's the only truth that matters. Amen.

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