

Jesus' Disaster Preparedness Plan

Luke 21:5-19

Sermon by Marilyn Rudy-Froese

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I can't say that reading the scripture text for this week is a reassuring exercise. There appears to be nothing in it that will calm anxiety. It's unsettling enough that Jesus says that the temple, known far and wide for its beauty, will be no more. But then he goes on to say that some will come in his name, but the disciples are not to be led astray or go after these false prophets. And when they hear of wars and insurrections, they are not to be terrified, for these must happen first. Oh, and the end will come, but not immediately. First, nation will rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes, famines, plagues, dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

Wars, earthquakes, famines, plagues--those are all pretty terrifying. But then, Jesus says that they will be arrested and persecuted; they will be handed over to synagogues and prisons and brought before kings and governors because of Jesus. They will even be betrayed by parents and siblings, by relatives and friends, and some will even be put to death. They will be hated by all because of Jesus' name.

And what is Jesus' advice or plan, in the midst of all this terror and destruction? Don't prepare your plan of defense. All these bad things are an opportunity for you to testify. But don't prepare--you will be given the words you need. And, not a hair on your head will perish. And for the record, by enduring all this, you will gain your souls.

That doesn't sound like any disaster or emergency preparedness plan I've ever heard of. Last year, I went to a pastors' gathering to learn about the Elkhart County and St. Joseph County emergency preparedness plans. What

was interesting to me was that the presenters seemed to start at the same place as Jesus--outlining what the worst disaster could look like; showing pictures of communities devastated by tornadoes; reminding us that it could be our churches, or our own homes that would be impacted, or destroyed. At one point in the presentation, I could feel the anxiety rising within me--what will I do if I've lost my home, or my family members? What will our congregation do if many homes or lives are lost? I thought--this isn't what I signed up for, get me out of here!

Our anxiety is based on what we have seen and know can happen; we have seen the devastation of communities, not just from tornadoes, but from all sorts of disasters and tragedies. Images of the typhoon in the Philippines are fresh in our minds this week; we can all probably still picture the devastation from Hurricane Katrina, the tsunami in Indonesia, the earthquake in Haiti, pictures of children dying of starvation from drought-stricken places in Africa, and many other disasters. We know that in a matter of seconds, what we know and love can be ripped out from under us, taken from us, gone forever. The anxiety of 'it's just a matter of time before disaster strikes our community, our family, our lives' lurks in the shadows of our psyches.

Unlike Jesus, however, the presenters at the Emergency preparedness workshop outlined a plan. They told us what the services are that exist in the community in case of an emergency; how they are organized so that they can respond. And they had us think about who and what are the resources in our churches and our communities that can be used or called on in times of disaster. It was helpful to know there is an over-arching plan, even if some of it will need to be modified, depending on the kind of disaster.

This gospel story was written during a time of great stress and difficulty for the early Christian church. Luke wrote this gospel after the temple had already been destroyed, when the people were living amid painful and prolonged suffering, when relief from this destruction was nowhere in sight. If we read these words of Jesus in light of the stories of Acts and the early church, we recognize that rather than a prediction of the future, they are

describing what the early Christians were experiencing. These words of Jesus were a description of the persecution and death that the early Christian church was experiencing because of their faith. In that context, they were heard as reassurance and encouragement to persevere in suffering, rather than words that would heighten their anxiety. In many ways, the worse had already happened, and Jesus' words served to empower them to rely on what they knew to be true--that God was with them, and the Holy Spirit would empower them and give them what they needed when they needed it. And if what they needed was courage to face their own deaths, as they'd seen their fellow believers face their deaths, then so be it. They knew they were ultimately in the arms of a loving God, who would protect them from ultimate, eternal harm.

Jesus' words were also the assurance to them that they were on the right path; that while Jesus brought healing and wholeness to countless people during his ministry, following him meant to follow him all the way, even when, most likely when, that meant following him through hardship, suffering and persecution, all the way to the cross and death. And, because this story was written years after Jesus' earthly life and ministry, those hearing the story in the midst of persecution, would also know that the cross and death did not have the last word; that while they may experience persecution and face their own deaths, death will not break the power of life that was theirs because of Jesus--that, in fact, not a hair on their heads would perish; that, in fact, facing with endurance and perseverance this path of discipleship, was the way to gain their very souls. This is the path to life. And with this assurance, they could testify with their lives to the constancy and faithfulness of God.

Our own history as an Anabaptist people is filled with just such stories of faithfulness and trust in the face of persecution and death. Our spiritual ancestors declared their faith and trust in God, even though, for many, doing so meant torture and death. Today, around the world, Christians are still

dying for their faith; speaking out in courage and hope, testifying to a God who is faithful and true.

And each of us, in our own lives, testifies to God's faithfulness in times of difficulty. We hear it each Sunday during sharing time, when people speak of how God has been present and at work in the midst of joy and struggle. The confidence that we can bring our concerns before God and this community, and that doing so makes a difference, is a testimony to our belief in God's faithful presence.

In our text for today, these words of Jesus offer hope and a reminder of a vision beyond the present reality. These words of Jesus offer a connection to a picture of life beyond this present suffering. And they are also a reminder of the power of God to be present even in the midst of suffering. The story of God is a story not about the past or the future, although it is both of those things, but a story about the present. The story of God in history is a story that continues today, of God active amidst the struggles and hardships we face.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus entered the chaos of people's lives--the chaos of sickness, blindness, sin, estrangement--and brought order, healing and wholeness. He calmed the anxiety of disaster by his ministry of reconciliation, hope and salvation. He pointed to the reality of God at work in people's present lives.

From the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation, the stories that are told are stories of chaos being pushed aside and order and healing and restoration being brought to life.

And in between these verses are many which affirm this vision of a life of wholeness and peace, a life lived in the presence and safety of God. This is the emergency plan that Jesus offers to us. Sure, we can make every effort to prepare for disasters that might realistically happen to us, but in the end, we

have no idea what will happen to us. In the end, what we can rely on is the presence of the Holy Spirit to give us the strength and wisdom we need to meet what faces us. We can trust in God not to abandon us. And we can hold onto this vision for a peace and a wholeness that goes beyond this life we know.

It is perhaps just such a vision that inspired Thomas Dorsey, the writer of the hymn, Precious Lord. Dorsey was born in 1889 in rural Georgia and was a prolific songwriter and an excellent gospel and blues musician. As a young man, he moved to Chicago and worked as a piano player, dividing his time between playing in clubs and playing in the church. After some time of turbulence, he devoted himself exclusively to the church. In August of 1932, he left his pregnant wife in Chicago to travel 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 in the same casket 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, he recorded this testimony while in the midst of suffering. (*Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 4, p. 312)

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.

May our lives be a testimony to the presence of God in our joy and in our suffering.