

Speaking Truth

God of grace, speak to us today. Help us to listen, to understand, and to respond in faith to your word. Amen.

You know that the pastors don't pick out the Bible readings for worship, right? At this church, we generally follow the Revised Common Lectionary, a 3-year cycle of readings that was selected many years ago by a committee of people who were trying to make sure that worshippers – not just Lutherans, but Christians across denominations – would hear from all the Gospels, all of Paul's letters, as many of the Psalms as possible, and a wide range of books and stories and styles of writing from the Old Testament. The readings for this Sunday are the ones that show up every third year as we get close to Advent.

And what readings they are for today. Jesus tells us:

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.

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. (from Luke 21)

Wow. This is not the Jesus I remember from Sunday School lessons and nativity scenes.

What happened to warm fuzzy Jesus who welcomes the children and shepherds the sheep? Where is gentle Jesus, meek and mild, infant holy, infant lowly?

Well, as it turns out, the Jesus of Sunday School stories is not always the same as the Jesus of Scripture. There are many times when Jesus was a rabble-rouser, when he said or did things that ticked people off.

One of the wonderful things about Jesus, as we meet him in Scripture, is that he tells it like it is. Jesus does not mince words. When something needs to be named, Jesus calls it out!

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus is calling out the complacency of the faithful people around him. Things are *so good*, they said.

Jesus replied – just wait.

Things are not what they seem.

Yes, this temple is beautiful and we are at our prime as a society right now in many ways. But under the surface, a revolution is simmering.

Workers are underpaid.

Women are objectified.

Immigrants are abused, and prejudice about ethnic groups is harming our community.

Health care is reserved for the privileged, and those in power cannot see the needs of their neighbors.

The poor are ignored and mistreated.

People are afraid for their lives.

It cannot stay this way, says Jesus.

Something's gotta give.

Jesus sees injustice, and Jesus calls it out. His entire ministry was based around the imbalance of power in his society, and the need for people to see and love and respect one another. Why else would he heal lepers and care for widows? Jesus' ministry was subversive because he told the truth, and acted on it.

And the truth in today's lesson is that the people in power are self-centered, self-righteous, and unfaithful to the commands of God.

Anyone who knows anything about unfaithfulness in the Bible knows that God treats it as the ultimate sin. Whenever God's people stray from God's commands, they are sent to wander in the wilderness for 40 years; or are subjected to exile in Babylon; or the single nation founded on the Scriptures is divided in two, based on different interpretations of God's word. It's all in the Bible – this is the history of Israel. These are the circumstances into which the prophets preached, and during which the Psalms were written. With a few peaceful exceptions, the people of God spent much of their history being unfaithful to God, at the societal level, and God punished them for it.

It's coming, Jesus says. We are being unfaithful again. And so the destruction and the punishment will be coming again. The central place of worship will be destroyed, and there will be political upheaval.

Jesus can read the writing on the wall and he doesn't mince words in his predictions. He warns us of the terrible things to come.

And yet.

Even though he knows that disaster is imminent – even though he can see how the people are bringing about their own destruction – Jesus holds out hope. “Not a hair on your heads will perish,” he says.

Jesus holds out hope – for life, and for a better future.

Isaiah does the same, in today's Old Testament reading.

While the Scriptures are full of stories of the people of God being unfaithful and bringing about their own destruction, the Bible also give us hope for better times. Isaiah talks about a new heaven and a new earth. “The former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.”

If we are living in the moments *immediately prior* to the creation of a new heaven and a new earth – if we are part of those “former times” – it must *seem* like the end of the world to us.

But even if we can't see it yet, something better *is* coming. God will rejoice in the people and there will be no more pain or sorrow. The people will be safe in the new reality that awaits. That is what the vision from Isaiah promises.

That whole section that begins “they shall build houses and live in them” – that is a response to an earlier prophetic warning, when the people of Israel were about to be taken into exile. The prophet Zephaniah warned the people about the results of their unfaithfulness before they were taken into exile in Babylon.

He told the people that disaster would be coming:

Their wealth shall be plundered,
and their houses laid waste.

Though they build houses,
they shall not inhabit them;

though they plant vineyards,
they shall not drink wine from them. (Zeph 1:13)

Isaiah is writing after the people have returned from the Babylonian exile. So he repurposes the words of Zephaniah for his own day, for a better time, for an era when the people are rebuilding their society and reigniting their relationship with God.

They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat;

They shall not labor in vain,
or bear children for calamity. (Is 65:21-23, edited)

Even when things seem hopeless, there is a long history of rebuilding and restoration for us to remember. Where Jesus calls out a world of injustice, Isaiah looks forward to a world of peace. Both can be true. And both hold out a ray of hope.

The world may be unjust today, as it was in Jesus' time, but that does not mean that there is no possibility for things to get better. Even in times of tragedy and sorrow, God is there. God has the power to bring peace. When our institutions and sacred places have been knocked to the ground, God can help us rebuild.

Not a hair on our head will perish, Jesus promises. Of course, this comes immediately after he says that some of us will be put to death. Which is it, Jesus? Utter safety or death at the hands of people we love? Again – both can be true.

Some of us will be able to survive the destruction unscathed. Those of us who are members of the ruling class, who have power in society, who have the right skin color or family structure or connections – even if we are lamenting the horror of the destruction, we will probably be safe. Those of us who have fewer material resources, we who are women, we who love who society says we should not, those of us who do not fit into the normative mold created by the ruling classes – we will have a harder time. Our lives are at risk.

During the Roman occupation of Israel, which was going on in Jesus' time, some people were safe. Some people chose to cooperate with the authorities and they lived to fight another day. And some people in those days did not or could not cooperate with the ruling class.

As women, half of the population was automatically discredited. People from Samaria were treated like second-class citizens. People were not treated as though they were all equally created in the image of God.

And yet, we know this to be true.

Each and every one of us really, truly, has been created in the image of God. Every person has value. God loves and honors every single one of us. Jesus believed that, and he lived it out in his ministry that healed the sick, fed the hungry, proclaimed freedom to the captive and let the oppressed go free!

And it got him executed.

Both-and.

Both safety – if Jesus had chosen that route... and a death sentence – if Jesus treated everyone as a child of God.

But even the death sentence can be good news. Remember that even though he was put to death, Jesus did not stay in that tomb! Through his death, he conquered death, and through his resurrection, we all are promised eternal life in the kingdom of God.

We have the example of Jesus to live by, and we have the hope of Isaiah to sustain us. The example of Jesus is not always hopeful, and the vision of Isaiah does not always seem realistic. But both of these ways of seeing the world are true, they are faithful, and they have great precedent in Scripture.

For many of us today, we see the world self-destructing, or we look around and see things that are appalling to us – our family relationships are deteriorating over political issues. Some of our loved ones

are afraid of their neighbors, and some of our children or grandchildren are reporting awful behavior from their schools. You might even be afraid of what the future will hold for you.

Isaiah promises peace.

Jesus promises life.

And following in the long tradition of the prophets and martyrs, I believe that we are also called to action, while we await the coming of that peace and life.

When things seem hopeless around us, *we the people* are left to declare God's goodness in the face of evil. Without our Messiah in our midst today, *we the people* are the ones who can carry on the message of Jesus. As it says in the Gospel lesson, we are called upon to testify! Our job is to testify to the values of Jesus:

Workers deserve fair pay.

Women are not objects.

Immigrants and ethnic groups are children of God who we are to welcome into our communities.

Health care is meant for all people, and those in power must be made to see the needs of their neighbors.

The poor can no longer be ignored and mistreated.

People are afraid for their lives. But if we treat everyone as Jesus wants us to treat them, then no one needs to be afraid any more. Love is love. So love one another, just as God in Christ loves you.

Even in the midst of apparent disaster, God is with us. God has the power to bring peace. And *we* have the power to be the agents of change. It may not be easy, and it may not even be safe, but that is the example that Jesus sets for us and expects us to follow.

When the world is tumbling down around us, we cannot hide from the reality of life – we are called upon to remain faithful to God. Faithfulness means working for justice, and preparing for the new heaven and the new earth that we know are on the way.

God gives us hope for a new world to come, and our courageous action is our faithful response. It is our job to tell it like it is – to speak truth to power, and to advocate for the underprivileged. Just like Jesus did.

May God, who has taught us these things, give us the wisdom and the courage to do them.
Amen.