

## **The Future of Faith**

A Sermon by Louise Westfall

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**Text: Luke 21:5-19**

A few years ago, a cartoon appeared in the *New Yorker* depicting a gowned and bearded prophet walking the city streets carrying a placard that read, “The end is *not* near. Deal with it!” The cartoon resonated with my discomfort about what I view to be fundamentalist readings of biblical texts referencing the end of human history. Preoccupation with the future seems to produce less concern about the present and fuel human judgment about who are the righteous and who are the damned. My strategy has been to skip over those texts, reasoning, “Presbyterians don’t worry about the end (after all, we have predestination!), plus there are plenty of texts ripe for preaching about loving one’s neighbor and taking care of the poor.

But more recently, you’ve helped me realize the danger of that strategy. If the mainline church abdicates responsibility for interpreting biblical teaching on end times, we create the silence that fundamentalist voices will fill. We should not be surprised at the runaway success of the *Left Behind* series, and the perception that these books represent the single Christian view of the end of the world. The group who gathered to discuss this text demonstrated no squeamishness regarding eschatology—that is, teachings about the ultimate future. I won’t say their attitude was “bring it on,” but they were as eager as I to hear in these words something more than the narrow, politicized religious agenda set forth in *Left Behind*. Listen for God’s Word in the reading from the gospel according to Luke, in the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter at the fifth verse. [LUKE 21:5-19]

Not since the dawn of the nuclear arms race and its logical possibility of “mutually assured destruction” has an issue prompted thoughts of the end times as has the environment. Concern for the effects of global warming through increased emission of carbon dioxide gases into earth’s atmosphere has prompted long-range predictions and projections ranging from problematic to dire. The sense of urgency varies and political will to make changes ebbs and flows; but almost everyone can at the very least imagine consequences that would threaten the survival of the planet. This is the way the world could end: as the poet put it, not with a bang, but a whimper.

Almost since its origins, Christian faith has taught that human history is on a trajectory that at some point will end, or actually, culminate in the return of Christ to judge all people. The morning text is one example of many in the New Testament which characterize the end times by cataclysmic natural events, prolonged violence and warfare, and devastating changes to the human condition through famine and disease. These struggles were seen as “signs”—precursors to a great cosmic struggle between good and evil, and the coming of “the Son of Man” in final judgment. When you realize that by the time the gospel of Luke was put in written form, both the predictions of persecution and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple had come to pass, it’s not hard to conclude that first century Christians believed the end was near.

Throughout the ensuing two millennia, doomsday predictions along with detailed timetables have been proclaimed—and been used to control and manipulate people’s behavior. Frankly, it’s one of the reasons these texts hold little resonance for mainline Christians. For one thing, the Bible’s description of the end “signs” are a lot like horoscope readings—general enough to interpret in your own way, to fit your personal situation. When in human history, for example, have there *not* been war and revolutions, change and upheaval? The *Left Behind* series seems utterly confident in its application of these texts to the present time, placing

thinly- veiled political figures and actions within the apocalyptic landscape, and identifying them as forces for good or evil. “The end” in these books is so politicized and luridly described that it reads like revenge fantasy, with a small band of the narrowly-defined righteous to be saved and all others to be damned.

If biblical teaching about the end of human history is going to hold any meaning for us, I think we have to step back from these fundamentalist interpretations and look again at what is actually being proclaimed...and what is not. What is not is a timeline. Whenever Jesus makes reference to “those days” he makes clear that no one knows when they will be. He warns against attributing any particular event to a sign that the end is near, and urges supreme skepticism towards those who claim to know. Apparently we will have to wait (perhaps a very long time...or maybe next year) to sing “Hail to the Victors” with any basis in reality!

At the same time, however, Jesus’ word is one of hope in the face of difficulties and tragedies. The destruction of the Temple was cataclysmic to the first-century faithful, because the Temple was the sign of God’s real presence with the people. Nevertheless, Jesus countered, God is near. God cannot be confined to human schemes and theologies, or destroyed by human decisions or powers. God rules. And God is at work within human history to bring it to a good end. In fact, claims one contemporary theologian, it has been a fatal mistake of Christian tradition in doctrine and spirituality to emphasize “the end of the old age” rather than the “new world of God,” the beginning of a new day. Jurgen Moltmann— professor emeritus at Tubingen University in Germany and one of my former teachers-- has become the leading architect of an alternative eschatology that places Christ at its center. Rather than a scenario of retributive justice in which the unjust are punished, Moltmann envisions the cross as the sign of God’s creative justice which heals and restores both victims and perpetrators.

The goal of the Last Judgment is not reward and punishment but victory over all that is godless, over the powers that hurt and destroy life. This great Day of Reconciliation will see the salvation not only of humans but of all living creatures, this world the very dwelling place of God, echoing the words of Revelation: *God will wipe every tear from our eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.* [from a lecture entitled “*God’s Unfinished Future: Why It Matters Now,*” reviewed by Peter Steinfels in the *New York Times*, January 19, 2007] I find Moltmann’s perspective compelling and energizing, an affirmation of hope-- not tied to human faith—but built on the bedrock of God’s faithfulness and steadfast love.

---which helps us look at reality -not deny reality—and see something other than what is there now. Can’t you just picture the scene in the temple and some marveling at its breathtaking beauty (not to mention its 100-rank pipe organ) and Jesus reminding them (and us) that all human institutions are contingent?! God is not confined there. The temple is not permanent; the Presbyterian Church as we know it may change; Fairmount may not be tomorrow what it once was or is today. But God is. And God will be. In God alone rests the power to transform reality into something new; something life-giving.

Towards the end of our discussion of this text, one of the participants confessed that he had been angered by it at first reading; that it was yet another forecast of doom destined to be exploited for political purpose or religious gain. “But now,” he said, “I see that it is much more a promise of comfort; that at any and every point in human history God is present, God has overcome, God will last.”

There is more here than a healthy antidote to the smug assessment of those who seem already to have judged the good and the evil. There is more here than a promise of future bliss in heaven, of “pie in the sky by and by.” Biblical teaching about the end times sounds a call to action. This present time

is an opportunity to bear witness to God's redemptive power in a world in which violence is so deeply imbedded. To testify that the status quo is not the final word in history. To throw ourselves wholeheartedly into life here and now, as if it were part of God's grand design to save the world. Because it is!

In the first church I served as pastor, I became acquainted with an elderly man who was dying from cancer. Les loved all growing things, and though he had long-since retired from farming, his yard was a garden of flowers and shrubs. One day he said that he wanted to plant a stand of trees as a windbreak along one side of his yard, and proudly showed me 8 - two-foot-high pine trees, their roots still wrapped in burlap coverings. "But Les," I blurted out, "it will take 20 years or more for those trees to mature!" The words were out before I realized how awful they were, how unnecessarily they called attention to the short time he had left. But then Les smiled at me, a smile as wide as eternity, and replied, "That's why I'm going to plant them this afternoon!"

Friends, the heart of eschatology is hope. It's good news of God's promise to redeem the whole world. Human history has a destination—the Kingdom of God—spiritual wholeness, peace, and life for all. We're on the way. What we do matters; God invites us to join the redemptive work God has begun. We won't sing "Hail to the Victors"—not just yet. But from the depth of our beings, let us cut loose with "Now Thank We All Our God." And then let's get on with the planting and the watering and the weeding; the giving and forgiving; the including and the serving and the testifying. We have seen the future, and it is God's. By God's grace, it will be ours as well.

TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE WHO CALLS US TO SHARE GLORY  
IN UNION WITH JESUS CHRIST, BE THE POWER FOREVER. AMEN.