

23 Pentecost C

Isaiah 65:17-25

Isaiah 12:2-6

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19

Rev. Trish Schmermund

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Holy Spirit Lutheran Church, Edmonton

Grace and peace to you from Jesus who loves us.

This part of Luke's gospel is rather concerning. It certainly does not project a sense of peace and calm at first read – but outright names disasters, wars, toppling nations, persecution and so much more. Yes, this is the same one who wrote the beautiful Christmas story with barnyard witnesses and gentle shepherds and who now writes a terrifying tale for the family of faith.

This passage is often treated as predictive – as a warning to heed: if one is a person of faith you are forewarned to be on guard, be vigilant, be ready! It's a passage preachers sometimes use to evoke fear and obedience or even to solicit giving as proof of one's commitment.

I don't believe Jesus works that way. Jesus does not manipulate us into faith, nor is it something that we can ever pay for. Nor does Jesus drive us to compliance through fear. Faith is always driven by love.

So let's look at the first part of verse 9: *“When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified.”*

This (wars and insurrections) were actually happening when Luke wrote this. If you recall 1st Century Palestine history, you will know that when Luke wrote his book, the Temple had already been destroyed. Political unrest was everywhere. Christians were in hiding, fearful of being fed to lions for sport. Rome kept the nation in “peace” (called “pax Romana”) which wasn't “peace” at all because it was accomplished by force. One is unlikely to challenge the government if the risk of losing your life is probable. Some 50 years before Luke wrote this, at that point in Jesus' life, shortly before he was killed, the situation was the same – which actually led to Jesus' arrest. Peace wasn't anywhere to be seen, it was violence and oppression that ruled the masses.

Our world has felt a little more crazy the past while. Perhaps it's not that things are worse, but they definitely are different. We might not have Roman soldiers carousing the streets, but we've had insurrections. We may not have wars in our backyard, but we are all impacted by those across the globe. We may not live in earthquake country, but we share a collective concern for the environment. What is even more concerning perhaps, is that it feels like there is no end, no

solution to the problems we face. And in that case, passages like this from the Bible, can almost provide a sense of relief. We might find ourselves saying – *if we can't change things at least there will be an end.*

Back to v. 9, which reads:

When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified.

What is happening here is that Jesus isn't making a *prediction*, but it's more like he's holding up a mirror to the way the world *already* was. The ways of sin, greed, power, envy, division are ingrained in the human community nearly from all the way back to the beginning. What is happening in our cities, families, nations today is part of a pattern, part of a condition of humanity. Jesus is simply naming what already is.

And then he says, *when you hear... do not be terrified.* Try it with me.

We've heard of natural disasters, volcanoes erupting, hurricanes blowing, floods pouring, pandemic waves, substance use, crime, and family violence.

And WHEN YOU HEAR these things DO NOT BE TERRIFIED.

All kinds of evil will come from the sinful nature of people such as power-hungry leaders who don't care about the rights of others. Slavery will persist, children will go missing, women will be stoned.

And WHEN YOU HEAR these things DO NOT BE TERRIFIED. God will be there to help you.

People will be persecuted for political reasons and for religious beliefs and some will be victims of oppression, violence, hatred, bullying and we will all be fearful that things will never change.

But... WHEN YOU HEAR these things DO NOT BE TERRIFIED.

Even the things that were built to last, like the Temple in Jerusalem, the great Titanic, roadways, office towers, healthcare systems, will one day come to an end. The church will decline with few returning to worship making the church unrecognizable. Nothing will be as it was.

And WHEN YOU HEAR these things DO NOT BE TERRIFIED.

Do not be terrified because the things that are really meaningful in life, the things that truly endure are not like these things. What endures, what lasts are the things of God: love, compassion, forgiveness, concern, understanding,

joyfulness, playfulness, laughter, a child's smile and the gentle touch of a grandparent.

Even after the worst of tragedies, when all the systems and buildings and policies we created have failed, it's comforting to know that these things will endure. And they do because they are what God has done.

And so, WHEN YOU HEAR... DO NOT BE TERRIFIED.

Because Christ promises us his peace and his presence in all things.

When he was born we called him Emmanuel: God with us. When he returned to heaven he promised to be with us always. He is the Alpha and the Omega, our beginning and end.

You see, God is not about destruction; He is about creating. When we mess things up he begins again and again. In Isaiah we heard God's declaration: 65:17 "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind."

Buildings, businesses, banks, homes, jobs, churches, will all come to an end, sickness, poverty, wars, hatred will never last either that's why God wants us to prepare and practice the things that do last: his abiding peace, forgiveness, and comfort.

And so WHEN YOU HEAR... DO NOT BE TERRIFIED.

Simply continue to do what Jesus has taught us to do: Baptize one another, proclaim God's love through word and deed, pray for the needs of the world and community, gather for worship, and trust in the promises of Jesus. Amen.