

Proper 28C Sermon
November 16, 2025
Trinity Episcopal Church
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This morning I want to start with a few words from the Gospel according to Anne Lamott, the writer. She wrote just a few days ago:

“Brothers and sisters, here we are, clueless about what the future holds but knowing who holds the future. I wonder if it would be so much skin off their divine nose to let us know how everything is going to shake down, so that we can make advantageous plans. But nooooo, this is not the system. The system is that on some days, God’s will unspools in the ways of a surrealist, non-linear movie director with PMS. Other days, we feel hilariously abundant love and grace, grace as spiritual W-D 40 that against all odds, and I mean ALL odds, pokes its thin red straw into our darkest and most clenched spaces. And most of the time, everything is pretty mixed up together. If I were God’s West Coast representative, I would have a much more organized system, all sad and weird events are in the knife slot in your silverware drawer, joy and peace where the big forks go, acceptance of the mystery in the salad fork slot, resentments and the desire for revenge in with the teaspoons.”

I’m sure you all can relate. This is just ... life. It’s how it has always been. Some days, some eras, feel a little more mixed up than others, and these current times certainly are one of those mixed up times. The same can be said for the days when Jesus walked the earth. And we are hearing a bit about that in today’s Gospel story from Luke. The disciples want Jesus to give them a more organized system, a way of predicting the future so they can prepare. But it’s just not how it works.

Jesus is in the temple with them, in Jerusalem. He watches them admiring the temple, its beauty, its stonework ... but this institution has become corrupt, exploiting the poor, when it should be a house of worship. The temple was a re-building project by King Herod to display his power and wealth. It was ostentatious and impressive. As the disciples are admiring it, Jesus says that “the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” Then he gives a speech about how things are going to get really really bad. And the disciples, like Anne Lamott, want to know *when* this will take place so that they can be prepared. When will all these terrible things occur? Jesus doesn’t give them an answer, but he does reveal a few truths that I’d like to highlight.

#1: He tells him to “not be terrified.” I actually find this hysterical. Like ... it’s so bad it’s funny. He could have just said, “do not be afraid,” like we hear him say a lot throughout the gospels. But this time he says, “When these things happen, do not be *terrified*.” Um, ok, Jesus. Not feeling better yet. Jesus is naming that if they feel terrified when they hear what will come topass, that is a legitimate response. And still, he says they don’t need to feel that way.

#2: He says, “The end will not follow immediately.” I also think this is funny. So not comforting!

This passage is sometimes quoted by people who are convinced that we are living in the end times. The thing is, people have been saying that forever because the world has always been crazy. The predictions in Luke 21 can pretty much match any period in history. Even though this passage sounds apocalyptic, Luke was referring to the upcoming destruction of the temple, not the end of the world. When Luke wrote these words, he knew that Jesus was not returning immediately because it hadn't happened yet! The early Christians expected Jesus to return very soon after the destruction of the temple that was foretold. But that didn't happen, at least not in the way they expected. Luke wrote this Gospel about 20 years after the destruction of the temple, which took place in 70 CE. He makes it sound like he is predicting something, but he is actually *describing* something that has already happened. The temple *was* thrown down. All of the terrible things Jesus warns about in this chapter, *did* take place. And afterwards, the followers of Jesus *did* face terrible persecution and betrayal and death. Luke knows this because he lived through it. He writes more about this in the Book of Acts, in which we hear stories of tremendous hardship right alongside miraculous stories of the birth of the early Christian church and its growth. So you could say that Luke isn't predicting something, but making meaning out of something that has already happened. Perhaps we can learn something from Luke here. Using our faith, we can make meaning out of current calamities, knowing that this has happened before, God is with us, and it's not the end of the story.

#3: After listing terrible things that will happen to the followers of Jesus, he says, "This will give you an opportunity to testify." I find it interesting that Jesus suggests terrible hardships give us an opportunity to testify. Usually we testify about how good God is, about all the blessings of life. But here, Jesus says that when we experience the really bad stuff: loss, betrayal, and destruction, that is when we need to testify. It reminds me of this verse from 1 Peter where he says: "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you." Hope stands out a lot more when it is surprising, and when it is not expected.

About ten years ago, there was a terrible shooting in a church in South Carolina during a Bible study. It rocked the Black community as the shooter was a young white man filled with hate. The following Sunday of that week Rev. Otis Moss III, along with his father Otis Moss II, preached a sermon at their church in Chicago, grappling with the aftermath of this horrific event. The title of the sermon was "Prophetic Grief" and when I watch that sermon, they are testifying – testifying to courage and hope in the midst of a horrific event, and the resilience of a people that keep going against all odds. Where in your life do you have an opportunity to testify in the midst of great hardship? Not to evangelize, necessarily, not to persuade, but to testify – to speak truth about why you believe what you do, or how you are able to go on. Testify, he says, to the hope that is within you. And if you aren't able to, watch someone else who is, because hope is contagious.

#4: Here is the real zinger of this passage. Jesus says, "So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and wisdom." Jesus asks us to wing it when we testify! No thank you. I hate winging it. I write out my sermons word for word! I'm one of those people who catches myself having difficult conversations in my head in advance, imagining how the conversation might go. It's hard to wing it when testifying.

But Jesus tells us that's when it works best, and he will be there with us, and his spirit will move through us if we can get out of the way and trust.

We have stories of this happening with Jesus' followers in the book of Acts. And it doesn't turn out very well for many of them. I'm thinking of Stephen who testifies about his faith and publicly interprets current events in light of that faith – and then he is stoned to death. Testifying can be dangerous.

But do you have moments when you find yourself saying words that are just the right thing and you don't know where they came from? Or when you stumble on hope when it makes no sense? When we remember that the risen Christ is with us when we are most afraid, we can become present to the accompaniment that is happening. We often forget that the risen Christ is with us when we testify to the hope that is within us when we are in the grip of fear or suffering.

#5: All shall be well... eventually. This passage ends with Jesus saying that even if (even when) the worst happens, persecution, betrayal, destruction, etc.... “Not a hair on your head will perish.” This is where this passage moves from talking about the historical destruction of the temple, to the actual end times – the final resurrection when all will be all in all. This is what Jesus' resurrection points to – the new creation – that will happen some day but that also already *is* happening – now and in the times to come. Jesus ends his speech by telling us to endure. He reminds us that all the grand structures of empire eventually fall apart. All prideful rulers always fall from their thrones. He calls us to endurance and to trust. Jesus is saying, “God's got this.” Hang in there. Testify to the hope that I have planted within you.

We hear the same message from today's Old Testament reading from Isaiah, in which we have a view of a future harmony – a resurrection reality of relationship, joy, and mutuality:

“For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.”

These words were written by Isaiah for a people returning from exile, facing the devastation of their homeland and needing to rebuild. Isaiah speaks hope into their reality by reminding them of what God will ultimately bring about. God is always creating a new thing out of our impossible moments.

I like to imagine God as not only right here with us, but also ahead of us, in the future, coaxing creation forward into this ultimate reality of shalom, peace, and resurrection joy. God is doing that with all of our moments, both the joyful ones but also the really dark ones – God showing up from the future into our nows, giving us the words to say, and calling us forward into our full selves in Christ.

The writer Rainer Maria Rilke says the same thing so beautifully.
Let it wash over you as we close:

“Why not think of God as the one who is coming, who is moving toward us from all eternity,

the Future One, culminating fruit of the tree whose leaves we are? What stops you from projecting his birth on times to come and living your life as a painful and beautiful day in the history of an immense pregnancy? Do you not see how all that is happening is ever again a new beginning? And could it not be God's Beginning, for to commence is ever in itself a beautiful thing."