

God of the Future

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Luke 21: 25-36

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This past summer, while my family was at camp in the Poconos, I had the opportunity to take Dominic on his first trip to New York City. Now, I have been to New York many times, but while the two of us were there, we both had an experience that even I had never had before. We stood together on top of the Empire State Building and drank in the wonder of the city below.

I wonder if you can remember the very first time you went to a big city like New York, Chicago or even Cleveland. Maybe you were just a child at the time, but can you remember the first time your heart raced when you saw dozens upon dozens of skyscrapers made of glass and steel that pierced the clouds one after another? Maybe the first time you went you took the elevator to the top of one of those skyscrapers and took in the wonder of the city, or maybe you went to a major league baseball game or an NFL football game and you were amazed at a stadium that could hold tens of thousands of spectators.

The first time I saw a major city it took my breath away. Now, I didn't grow up in the country, I lived in a suburb with paved streets and traffic lights and all that stuff. But still the most impressive thing we had to look out in the suburbs was a shopping mall with about twenty stores or a school with about twenty classrooms. So, to go to a city and see block after block of these buildings that went up into the clouds was magical. I hope you can remember the first time you saw something like that. I sort of feel sorry for people who live in cities like New York and Chicago who walk by these things every day and have become so used to them they've forgotten to stare at them and have their breath taken away.

I think I've told you that when I was a pastor in North Carolina, our church had a partnership with a church in Guatemala named Jesus El Buen Pastor. I went to this church one time, and let me tell you, the church is in the jungle. And when I say "the jungle" I do not mean that the church is just hidden among a couple dozen trees. I mean it is in the jungle. There is no road going to the church. There is no electricity. It is as far from civilization as you can imagine. Well, one time the pastor from this church, a man named Enrique came to visit us in North Carolina. A team from our Presbytery had picked Enrique up in Atlanta and drove him up to North Carolina. Now, when I met Enrique, his eyes were as wide as golf balls, and he was talking at about a hundred miles an hour; he was talking so loudly he was almost yelling, and he was gesturing wildly with his hands like this. Now, I speak Spanish pretty well, but Enrique was talking so fast I couldn't understand what he was so excited about. Well, I finally figured it out. He was talking about the Atlanta airport. Now, if you have never been to the Atlanta airport, take a connecting flight there sometime and then you will understand why this pastor from the jungle was so excited.

And not only will you understand this pastor from the jungle, but you will also understand our story from the gospel for today. For in our story today, although this part of the story isn't in our reading, we have the disciples walking around with Jesus in downtown Jerusalem and they are standing outside the Jerusalem temple. Now, you have to understand these disciples are country folks. They are from Nazareth. And they are looking at this temple which stands ten to sixteen stories high and covers thirty five acres of land, and they say "Lord, what large buildings, can you believe what we're looking at? We don't have anything like this back in Nazareth." But Jesus does not seem so impressed and he says to them, "Do you see these

buildings, not one stone will be left on another.” Now to imagine that not one stone would be left on top of another of a building that stands maybe sixteen stories high and covers thirty five acres, you have to imagine quite a lot of destruction.

But not only does the Lord tell them that there will be destruction in the coming days and years, but we go on to hear that there will be more than just destruction. He says there will be distress among the nations and a day of wrath. People will fall by the sword and be taken away as captives. People will faint for fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world. And then, at long last, they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and glory.

Now as you hear all this, you have to imagine that the disciples must have been pretty disappointed by what they were hearing. But disappointed is not the right word. Maybe outraged is a better word, but outraged isn’t the right word either because outrage connotes anger at some injustice. What we need is a word for outraged and extremely disappointed at the same time, but I don’t think we have such a word in English. For you see, what had these disciples thought this Messiah Jesus was going to be? What had they expected of him? They had thought that he would be the one to end their suffering, to bring them peace and comfort. The Jewish people you see, had had enough. They had suffered under the Egyptians and then the Babylonians, and then the Greeks and now the Romans and they wanted an end to all this suffering, but here was their so-called savior telling them that not only would the suffering not stop it would even get worse. That couldn’t have been what they wanted to hear.

There are some Christians out there, believe it or not who will tell you that to be a Christian means that you will never have troubles, and if you do have troubles, it must mean that you don’t have enough faith, or you’ve done something terribly wrong. Now, these other Christians

are not bad people, some of them, in fact, are quite good people. But they will tell you that if you are a good enough Christian you won't have troubles in this life. Now, fortunately, there are others out there who will have sense enough to say that this isn't true, that God never promises you won't have troubles in this life. And you've probably heard that a lot. God never promises we won't have troubles in this life. But you know what else, not only does God not promise that we won't have troubles in this life, he even promises that we will. But here's what we learn from this story. What we learn is that in spite of everything, God is in control. God knows the end of the story, and this is all a part of God's plan. The days may be coming when this amazing temple is turned into rubble, but fear not, that is part of God's plan. The days may be coming when you will be in captivity, but fear not, that is a part of God's plan. The days may be coming when you will be persecuted, but fear not, that is a part of God's plan.

You know, while many mainline churches these days struggle to find members, I know that there are some churches around town that you can drive by on the interstate that are so big you could easily mistake them for shopping malls. And not only do these churches not struggle to find members, they can't seem to turn people away. And people say to me "What are those churches doing that we here at Northminster aren't doing?" Well, I can tell you one thing I bet they're not doing. I bet they're not saying a whole lot about the trouble people will face in this life. That is not a message that sells really well. I will do anything to help us grow here at Northminster, but one thing I will not do is lie through my teeth—and to stand up here and tell people that God says we won't have trouble in this life would be to tell a lie. But because I will not lie to you, you can also rest assured that I am telling you the truth when I say that no matter what trouble you may face in this life, everything which happens is a part of God's plan.

I don't know if you remember Alexander Haig very well, but Haig was Richard Nixon's Chief of Staff for about a year before Nixon resigned. After that, Haig became Secretary of State to President Reagan for about a year—and Haig was Secretary of State in March of 1981 on the day when Reagan was shot. Now, 1981 was a long time ago, but it was not so long ago that it was before the advent of satellite news. And because satellite news was around in 1981, everyone around the world knew that the President had been shot at the moment that we all knew it here in America. Well, while all this was happening, George Bush who was the Vice-President at the time was out of town, and as Reagan was in the operating room with surgeons working over him trying to save his life, the White House press secretary Larry Speaks was standing before the press in the briefing room trying to update the media on what was going on. Well, just then, some reporter raised his hand and asked, "Mr. Speaks, with Reagan in surgery and Vice-President Bush being out of town, who is in charge of the government at this time?"

Larry Speaks then famously said, "I don't know who's in charge."

Well, as soon as everyone could process what Mr. Speaks had just said, Alexander Haig came in the briefing room and he mounted the podium, and he said this, and I am almost quoting him. "Ladies and Gentlemen, I am now in charge of the government. I am in charge. As you all know, the Secretary of State is third in line to the President and so when the President is incapacitated and the Vice-President is out of town, it falls on the Secretary of State to be in charge of the government."

Well, it ended up being an embarrassing moment for Alexander Haig. In the first place, he had misstated the line of succession. The Secretary of State is not third in line to the President,

the Speaker of the House is third in line to the President. But not only had Haig misstated the line of succession, he already had a reputation as someone who was hungry for power, who lusted after power and this episode did nothing to help that reputation. But years later, Haig would explain why he did what he did. At the time we were fighting the Cold War with the Soviet Union, we were locked in a world struggle between freedom and totalitarianism. And when the whole world knew that the President was shot and the whole world had just heard that no one was in charge of the United States government, Haig wanted to reassure our allies like England and France that someone was in control. Before the Russians could use this opportunity to take over Europe, he wanted to reassure the world that someone back in Washington, D.C. was at the helm.

As we begin this season of Advent lighting candles, preparing for the coming of the Lord and looking to the future, we remind ourselves that God is in control of our future. We don't know when the Lord will return to us or what exactly all of this will look like, or how it will all come about, but none of that really matters, because we know who is in control. We know who is at the helm. Being reminded of all the troubles we can face in life may not fill the pews on Sunday morning, it may not be what everyone is looking for, but sometimes it is comforting to be reminded that no matter what happens God is in control, and sometimes that is even all the comfort we need.