

Frank Yates'
December 2024
Sermons

Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church
Rio Rancho, NM

December 1, 2024
Rev. Frank Yates

IN EVERY ENDING A NEW BEGINNING

Luke 21: 25-36

Have you ever wondered why certain stories are remembered and passed on in Scripture. The Gospel of John reminds us that Jesus did and said many other things not written down. So many that if everything had been written down, “the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.” So many stories, so many decisions as to which make the cut.

One reason stories were remembered is that they had contemporary relevance for First Century Christians. Most scholars agree that all the Gospels were put into their present form after the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. That event sent shock waves not only through the Jewish community but also the early church. Many wondered what that cataclysmic event meant, how they were to understand it.

Many thought that such a momentous event-like 9/11 in our country-surely must signal the end of the world. The Synoptic Gospel writers all record this event stressing one thing-no, the end of the Temple is NOT the end of the world. It is the end of an era, the Second Temple era. But not the end of the world.

The fall of the Temple is just the beginning of the Christian mission. So stay focused and stay tuned. More is yet to come. In the end is the beginning. That’s what Jesus seems to be saying. Consider the Last Supper. Yes, it was Jesus’ final meal with his followers. But it inaugurated the New Covenant with them “sealed

in his blood for the forgiveness of sins.” In every ending there is a new beginning.

In the events leading up to the destruction of the Temple Jesus sees a parallel to the events surrounding the end of the world. These cataclysmic events are not the same thing, but they do resemble each other. He says that the actual end of the world will be accompanied by these cataclysmic events: signs in the sky, the shaking of the powers of the heavens, the roaring of the seas and huge waves, like tsunamis. Then the nations will experience terrible distress and fear. All people will be overwhelmed with foreboding of what is coming. This is the true apocalypse, the final chapter in the story.

Yet in this doomsday scenario, Jesus surprisingly calls for hope. He says that “when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” He points to the fig tree blooming and says that these buds herald the coming of spring, the promise that “the kingdom of God is near.” There is more to come, redemption and renewal.

All these shattering events compel us to watch and hope for the coming of the Son of Man. The end of all things is but the beginning of the “world to come”, a new world redeemed and transformed. These events promise the answered prayer of millions: “thy kingdom come”. So instead of seeing the unsettling events of the end as dreadful, Jesus invites his followers to “lift up their heads” and lift up your hearts because your redemption is drawing near.

Now that is what we call “re-framing”. Jesus asks his followers to see these cataclysmic events in an entirely different way. I remember a story from the French Revolution when a crowd gathered to protest and French soldiers brought out their cannons. The commanding officer ordered that the “rabble” be shot. And so a

junior officer announced to the crowd, “We are under orders to shoot the rabble. But since I see only good citizens of Paris, I ask you to clear the square so we can shoot the rabble.” Well, that cleared the square. And that’s called “re-framing.”

Jesus takes note of the anxiety and dread we have of future events. Including our own death. He anticipates the fainting and fear. Despite our fears he encourages us to “take heed lest your hearts be weighted down with the cares of this life.” We are to pray that we receive strength to “escape all these things...to stand before the Son of Man.” A shorthand way of saying, “Be of good cheer. For Christ has overcome the world and all its fears.” That’s reframing.

Fears within, foes without, and anxiety everywhere. For sure. But here is the good news. For us the end is just the beginning. Advent is the beginning of the new liturgical year. And every Advent begins with the end, the coming of the Son of Man in glory and power. And we conclude every Advent with the coming of the Son of Man in weakness at Bethlehem. So in Advent we celebrate both the humility and the glory of Christ our Lord. The beginning and the end.

And we celebrate this deep and profound truth-in every ending is a new beginning. True for Advent and true for our lives. Whether a lost relationship or lost job or lost health or lost wealth or lost faith. In your congregation a long and fruitful pastorate has ended and now you are in a new beginning.

Whatever fears and anxieties haunt us, there is a path forward. There is something on the other side of the darkness. Why? Because God can create something out of nothing. Your life can begin again. Out of the rubble something new is promised. So lift up your head. Your redemption is drawing near. In the turbulence and in the fear, God is with you. That is the promise of Advent. In every ending there is a new beginning. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church
Rio Rancho, NM

December 15, 2024
Rev. Frank Yates

STANDING ON THE BRIDGE

Luke 3: 7-18

Take an imaginary journey with me this morning. Let's drive down the hill on Alameda to the bridge over the Rio Grande. Imagine cars parked everywhere and hundreds of people standing on the bridge. It has all the ambiance of the Ballon Fiesta, but it's not October. It's December 15, just nine shopping days before Christmas. So out of curiosity you park your car and walk out onto the bridge.

It's a motley crew gazing down into the muddy waters of the Rio Grande. Nobody will tell you what is going on. To your repeated questions, they simply say, "See for yourself." Soon you find an opening on the railing. You look down into the river and you see finally what the hubbub is all about. You're taken aback. It's John the Baptist.

He's come in from the outback to the outskirts of town. He's back, as he is every Advent. Once again John has waded ankle deep into the water and he's preaching that same ole fire and brimstone. John doesn't care much to preach in churches with hard floors. John much prefers a soggy bottom. So he's down there below the Alameda bridge with a voice as big as all outdoors.

It's unmistakable what he's proclaiming: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord!" It's a message that unsettles you and yet tugs at your heart. This is a clarion call that cuts like a laser into a cataract. It's a commotion that stops traffic on the Alameda bridge. And there you are standing on the bridge, and you simply cannot turn away.

That strangely dressed man down there in the mud is an unrelenting "Johnny One Note". "Repent, for the kingdom of God has drawn near." Repent! Change your attitudes, your thoughts, your ways. Because a new day is dawning and there's a train a-coming. To get on that Gospel train, you must change. Get a new heart, a new mind, a new outlook. If you want to get on board, then get ready, people, get ready!

Then you notice a stirring in the crowd on the bridge. Someone shouts down to John, “How do we get ready? How can we change?” And John shouts back, “Come on down, wade in the water. Confess your sins and wash them away. Cleanse yourself of your old ways and habits. Get an attitude adjustment down here in the river. And you will be forgiven and freed. And then you will be ready for that train that’s a-coming.”

Someone on the bridge shouts back, “You really want us to come down into the water?” “That’s right”, shouts John, “come on down right now whoever you are.” And come down they do. By the hundreds. They hurry to the end of the bridge and wade into the waters. Some of the young people just jump off the bridge. Thankfully no one is hurt. Ah, you think, youth is wasted on the young.

So you begin wondering and ask yourself, “Is this cheap grace?” You know your theology. Is that all there is? Just slog out into the waters to be baptized and then everything will be just fine? Surely there is more to it than that. Soon you learn there is much more to it.

Right then you hear a rustling in the crowd. People are moving back from the railing on the bridge. They are making way for an entourage, some dressed in robes. It’s the religious leadership from town. They heard about John on the news. They’ve come to take a closer look, perhaps a critical look. But to your astonishment John doesn’t even give them a chance. He shouts out, “You brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance.” John turns them away as intruders into his baptismal party. He sees their sense of entitlement and hypocrisy and dismisses them as irrelevant.

As you ponder what John means, another group saunters up to the railing. They look quite well-dressed. In fact, they look marvelous. They shout down their question, “Hey, John, what should we do?” And John shouts back, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none and whoever has food must do the same.” They stir with discomfort.

Then others make their way to the railing. They are tax collectors and revenue agents. They shout down, “Hey, John, what should we do?” And John shouts back, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Then some soldiers, some kind of militia unit, muscle their way to the railing. They shout down, “Hey, John, what about us?” And John shouts back, “Do not

extort money from anyone by threats or false accusations and be content with your wages.” Looks like John expects more than just a splash in the river.

Finally, a delegation from the government pushes up to the railing. They too shout down to John, who shouts back, “Stop your injustice. And some of you need to take a good hard look at your sexual ethics. You know who you are. Your behavior is scandalous.” One member of the delegation says to another, “The Herods of this world will not be amused. Not at all.” And sure enough they leave in a huff. Could be hard times ahead for John.

You cannot quite see if any of those folks waded down into the water-the religious leaders, the wealthy, the revenue agents, the soldiers and the government officials. All you can see are the hundreds who do want John to wash their sins away, to get them ready for that Gospel train that is a-coming.

You’re standing on the bridge. But you are not sure what to do. You are not easily enticed to wade down in the water. Why? Because you’re Presbyterian. Presbyterians ordinarily prefer to keep their feet dry. Besides, you’ve channel-surfed past religious fanatics on television a million times without the slightest hesitancy. Why would this day on the bridge be any different?

So you stand there, your hands holding tightly to the railing on the bridge. Maybe, just maybe, you are holding on for dear life. The old life you know so well. It’s hard to part with, even if it’s not so great. Even still you feel a pull toward the waters. It’s an unmistakable draw, this summons to a new life, a new attitude, a new heart. Washed, cleaned, renewed, getting ready for a new day that’s dawning.

Then John plays his trump card when someone shouts down, “John, are you the Christ?” . He insists he is not the Christ, because the Christ will be mightier than he. So mighty that John feels unworthy to even untie the thongs of his sandals. John is sure the coming One will separate the wheat from the chaff, the good from the bad. While John’s baptism is with water, the Coming One will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. John proclaims the Good News of the coming Christ, who is riding in on that Gospel train.

Now the summons seems deeply personal to you, as though John is somehow singling you out. He wants you to step forward, come down to the waters, get ready for that Christ who is to come. That Christ riding that Gospel train straight into your heart.

I am standing on that bridge between my yesterday and my tomorrow, the old and the new. I hear John's summons for me to wade in and feel the mud on my toes. I am standing on the bridge. What will I do this Advent? What will you do?

"Repent! For the kingdom of God is drawing near!"

Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church

Rev. Frank Yates

Rio Rancho, NM

December 22, 2024

SINGING WITH MARY

Luke 1: 46-55

On Tuesday Mariah Carey presented her Christmas Special at the Barclay Center in Brooklyn. As always it was highlighted by “All I Want for Christmas is You”. Dancing elves accompanied her onstage. I understand it was charming. A true made for t.v. special, like so many others this year.

Like many of you I grew up watching televised Christmas specials. Shows that featured Bing Crosby and Barbara Streisand singing “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas” and “Ave Maria.” I always like the way paper confetti fell gently on the performers as they sang “let it snow, let it snow, let it snow”.

So I began trying to imagine how those holiday shows would stage Mary singing her song the Magnificat. Imagine putting the Magnificat to music and putting Mary before the cameras. How would she come off? If I were a television director, I would face at least three significant problems.

First, our “star” Mary is quite young and inexperienced, a show biz “virgin” if you will. Unlike Brittany Spears, she is totally unaccustomed to the limelight. How could we get young Mary to just relax in front of all those lights and cameras, not to mention the international audience? Our peasant girl from Galilee does not look at all like Taylor Swift. In fact, she looks like those street people interviewed at Christmas struggling to feed and house their children when there is still no room in the inn.

Our second problem is rather more difficult. It’s the lyrics to her song, those words! Oh my! Christmas songs are meant to be touching and comforting, a celebration of home and hearth. Couldn’t she just sing “I’ll Be Home for Christmas”? Well, that would be lovely but it does not seem to fit Mary. Bethlehem for her was more a barn for stranded travelers than a home.

Truthfully, Mary sings a song you would never hear on Christmas specials. Her lyrics don’t sound at all like “Winter Wonderland” or “Jingle Bell Rock.” Her lyrics-dare I say it?-sound more like a protest song. Do we really want uncomfortable truths at Christmas? Honestly, at this time of year we all prefer Egg Nog.

As a television director, I would be faced with a real dilemma. How can I get Mary to sing something other than the Magnificat?

Perhaps we could have a close-up of Mary gazing lovingly into her infant's eyes. She could sing-let me think-something like this: "Tiny tots with their eyes all aglow will find it hard to sleep tonight. They know that Santa's on his way, he's loaded lots of toys and goodies on his sleigh, and every mother's child is sure to spy to see if reindeers really know how to fly." Now wouldn't that be darling.

Let's be candid here. What do you do with lyrics like this: "God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things and sent away the rich empty handed." Oh no, that would not work for our target audience.

Couldn't we just bring in reindeer and holly? You know, Mary and the child surrounded by snowmen and stockings and mistletoe. Perhaps Mary would consent to an instrumental version of her song-a lot of French horns playing and drummer boys humming. But clearly, Mary's lyrics will not do for a Christmas special. You understand, don't you?

As a director, there is a third and final problem. Who would accompany Mary? All Christmas specials have dozens of back-up singers, usually young children. They are decked out in furry coats,

sometimes on ice skates. It's a winter scene in the park, the sights and sounds of Christmas, Rockefeller Plaza ablaze with lights.

So who can sing back-up to Mary? That's a problem. Perhaps we could just have the Rockettes in their little Santa costumes do some high kicking. Everyone loves their choreography. Or maybe we could just have some cooing turtledoves sing back-up to Mary. Everybody likes singing birds.

Now let me admit the obvious. I am in fact not the director of a television Christmas special. I think you know that already. In fact, I am a preacher. I am called to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ. Now there is something quite curious about this good news-it is neither sentimental nor maudlin. It is a two-edged sword, cutting into our hearts, calling us to attention. Mary's lyrics are indeed good news-but only for those with ears to hear and eyes to see and hearts to receive it.

Furthermore, what is good news for some is bad news for others. Mary's song is good news for the poor, the humble, the needy. But bad news for the powerful, the rich, the indifferent. What is good news for the lamb is bad news for the lion. The proud are scattered, the arrogant are brought low, and the rich are sent away empty.

And that is precisely why Mary's song does not make it into Christmas specials. So here is my question for us all today: can the church sing authentically with Mary? Will we sing back up to this poor peasant girl? Is Mary's song on your playlist?

One of the most beloved members of University Presbyterian Church in Austin was another Mary-Mary Bobb. While serving that congregation as campus minister in the 1980's I got to know her well. Mary had served as a missionary for twenty years in the Republic of the Congo. The choir director at a mission school, her students called her "Mama Hallelujah". Why? Because she directed the church choir in singing the "Hallelujah Chorus" every Christmas. And she was always singing everywhere she went. And the students loved it.

Years later Mary went back to the Congo to visit the mission school and hospital. The old schoolhouse was dilapidated and overcrowded. The conditions were dire. But listen to her description of how the students coped. "One night I heard singing, beautiful harmony, not far away. So I took my flashlight and went down the path to the director's house. The back porch was full of young people, about 40 or 50. All just singing, enjoying themselves so much. I

really believe in those difficult circumstances the music is what keeps these children going.”

It is the music that keeps these poor children going. A song of hope despite the ever-present despair. A song of light overcoming the thick darkness. A song of love conquering the divisions. A song not unlike Mary’s song: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. For the Mighty One has done great things for me and holy is his name.”

This is Mary’s song, the song of Christmas. The birth of a child who will “fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty.” Will we sing with Mary this song of glad tidings for the poor? Can we sing with Mary?

This Christmas may we all sing with the angels: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors.” May it be so. Amen,

Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church

Rev. Frank Yates

Rio Rancho, NM

December 29, 2024

PARTING WORDS

Luke 2: 22-38

Sometime after Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary take the five mile walk to Jerusalem. There are two purposes for this trip. First, to offer a small sacrifice in the Temple to make Mary ritually clean after childbirth. Second, to dedicate Jesus as a first-born child to God. So to the house of God the holy family comes not to be welcomed by angels, but by elders of the tribe.

Inconspicuously they enter the Temple, that massive structure of stone and wood. But an old man named Simeon spots them and what is hidden is now revealed in a moment of inspiration. Like a watchman who has waited so long for news from the front, now Simeon receives the word that he has longed to speak. He holds in his arms the consolation of Israel, the Lord's anointed, the leader of his people. Simeon's fondest wish has been granted.

With Jesus in his arms, Simeon now offers praise and thanksgiving to God. The faithful God who fulfills promises made to Israel. Simeon speaks the famous Nunc Dimittis: "Lord, now let Thy servant depart in peace according to Thy Word, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation." Enough of waiting and longing and hoping. "Watchman, tell us of the night", the hymn says. And this watchman tells us that his tour of duty is complete, his endless wait is over.

So Simeon speaks parting words, holding Jesus in his arms. These are words of peace, inward peace in our hearts and a just peace in the world. Words of salvation for Israel and words of salvation for the whole world. Good News of a great joy. The Prince of Peace has come at last to save.

Then Simeon directs his attention to Mary, the mother of this special child. Now his words take a foreboding turn. This child will be the occasion for many to fall and to rise. He will prompt controversy and decision. And this child, Mary's child, will be spoken against and opposed by many. "Mary, did you know your baby boy will be the great divider?" Causing division within his own family, within the synagogue in Nazareth and throughout Israel, and finally stirring up hatred one day in Jerusalem.

And this baby boy will cause great pain and sorrow for Mary herself. "Mary, did you know your baby boy will suffer and die before your very eyes? Mary, did you know that a sword would pierce your own soul too?"

The air heavy with that dark prophecy, another prophet comes forward. Anna is her name, a widow for 84 years, who never left the Temple, but worshipped and fasted and prayed day and night. No doubt, Anna and Simeon had occupied that holy ground for many years together. Now she steps forward-almost to alleviate Mary's anxiety-with praise to God for this holy child. She saw in that babe the redemption of Jerusalem. The salvation for her people. The reason for her praise and thanksgiving.

After these memorable encounters, the holy family quietly departs the Temple, the words of Simeon and Anna still ringing in their ears. "And Mary

treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart” yet again as they journey north to Nazareth.

This morning I address the elders of this tribe, the Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church. Many of us identify with Simeon and Anna, long in the tooth yet with deep spiritual longings. Let me suggest three things you, the elders of our tribe, could ponder in your hearts.

First, let us acknowledge that our sojourn is coming to an end, some sooner and some later. Anna had been a widow for 84 years, which means she is close to 100. Simeon says that seeing Jesus is all he ever wanted and now he is ready to depart in peace. Simeon and Anna have lived long and now they prepare to exit, but not before seeing the Lord’s Anointed.

One thing about getting older-I will soon turn 77-is that you realize more clearly your own limitations. (One clue that I am ageing is that now days I get numerous cards inviting me to join the Neptune Society! Gotten any of those lately?)

One of my closest seminary friends was Paul Bitter. He arrived on the campus of Austin Seminary battling several conditions he contracted while trying to swim-no kidding-the lakes of the Panama Canal. He almost made it before he became ill. So he limped onto campus with several exotic ailments.

When Paul turned 60, he sent all his friends a card that announced, “I am 60. I have given up trying to swim the Panama Canal.” Now there are any number of canals I have given up trying to swim. With age hopefully comes wisdom. Knowing our limitations and accepting them patiently. Our task at

this stage of the journey is to age gracefully and gratefully. Remember Simeon and Anna spent their latter days praising God in the Temple. And so can we.

Second, let us acknowledge that even at their advanced age, Simeon and Anna are STILL prophets. They are still called! Like once an elder, always an elder. Still speaking Good News to Israel. Still proclaiming the coming of the Lord. Three generations came together that day in the Temple, but it was the elders who interpreted what it all meant. Simeon and Anna testify to this wondrous gift: “Unto us a child is given, unto us a son is born.” And now two elders of the tribe see that “today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Discipleship does not take retirement but prays with the Psalmist that even “in old age we will produce fruit” (Ps. 92:14). Whatever your age, can you show by word, and perhaps more importantly, by deed, that God is love and anyone who loves is of God? Will you demonstrate by your compassion for others and your efforts for peace and justice that your faith sustains you and gives you good hopes? Are you ever too old to be Christ-like and shine that light of Christ upon others? Never forget, Simeon and Anna were prophets to the end of their days. Can we be as well?

Third, let us acknowledge that Simeon and Anna point the way to the future. They are signposts of hope, heralding a new day dawning. The coming of the Lord’s Anointed. They saw in this child’s face the face of God, the reason we trust God and entrust our lives to him. The elders of the tribe point the way to a life of faith, hope, and love that holds firmly to the promises of God, the faithfulness of God, the love of God. The younger generation needs to

hear these words, “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations” (Ps. 90:1). So we encourage them to never lose heart and never lose hope.

Of one thing I am certain. The coming generations must be our primary passion: their future, their environment, their faith, their church, and their families. The old song says it well, “I can’t stop thinking about tomorrow.” That means we do not surrender to nostalgia or regrets or bemoaning the present. If our tag line is “ain’t it awful”, then we have a great future behind us. We literally do not have time for that kind of self-indulgence. Our tag line should be, “Trust the Lord and entrust your ways to him.”

Dear elders of this tribe, we need to hold fast to our faith in the living God who has sustained us even to this day. Our God who will be faithful to our children and their children, from generation to generation. We are living pointers to that “coming Kingdom” where “all will be well and all manner of things shall be well.” We do not look backward with sorrow. We look ahead with great expectations. For God goes before us, not behind us. “A cloud by day, a pillar of fire by night” leading our children and their children into God’s future.

Our role models are Simeon and Anna, those elderly prophets of the age to come. May we speak a word of hope to coming generations through all the days yet given to us. Thanks be to God. Amen.