

Days of Patience

Luke 21:20-28

Laura Anderson ~ Faith Presbyterian Church ~ August 25, 2019

²⁰“When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. ²¹ Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those inside the city must leave it, and those out in the country must not enter it; ²² for these are days of vengeance, as a fulfillment of all that is written. ²³ Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress on the earth and wrath against this people; ²⁴ they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

²⁵“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶ People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” (Luke 21:20-28)



Friends, tomorrow I officially start my MDiv studies, which will eventually involve taking preaching classes. Today I am preaching a sermon on destruction and judgment and terror. If this sounds a little like the cart before the horse to you, it does to me, too. Rarely have I ever felt so unequal to a task involving the Bible.

Here’s what we’ve got in this passage: the siege and destruction of Jerusalem as the manifestation of God’s vengeance; the death and enslavement of many people, including the vulnerable; strange terrestrial and cosmic happenings so terrifying that just the thought of them leaves people passing out from fear; and the Son of Man coming on a cloud. And somewhere amidst these strange and hard words, there is the Good News of Jesus Christ. So we’re going to dig down and find it together.

We’re going to move forward by focusing on three questions: First, why does God bring destruction on Jerusalem? Second, why are these end times, which began with the destruction of Jerusalem and continue

still today, why are they lasting so long? And third, what does any of this have to do with us, really? To make some headway in answering these questions, we will start and finish in the text, but in between we will take a few flying leaps to other sections of Scripture. Here we go....

Let’s start with the question about why Jerusalem was destroyed. Here’s what the annals of history would suggest: Rome was Judea’s overlord. It had conquered Judea in 63 BC. As the imperial ruler of the greatest empire on earth at that time, Rome expected its colonies to behave. If you as a colony paid your taxes and tribute to Rome, respected the emperor and his envoys, and didn’t have violent insurrections that threatened Rome’s power in your neck of the woods, chances are you would be okay; Rome would leave you alone because it was too busy expanding and consolidating its imperial power. Israel, however, had a real penchant for insurrection under the Romans. The people were always on the lookout for a messiah who would come in military might and cast off their Roman overlords. In fact, the people of Judah and Jerusalem were so problematic that the Romans maintained a garrison of soldiers right there on the temple mount so they could quickly move in and quell potential uprisings. In the decades after Jesus’ crucifixion, political unrest grew until it emerged as full-blown insurrection in the 60s and overwhelmed the Roman soldiers in Jerusalem. Roman troops were sent in and besieged Jerusalem. After a four-year attack against the city, the Romans were victorious. They destroyed the city, leveled the temple, killed indiscriminately, and hauled survivors off to Rome as slaves. From a historical perspective, this is why Jerusalem fell and the Temple was destroyed: The Romans did not tolerate uppity colonials. The Romans were bigger and stronger. So they won. Period.

The problem with this explanation from history becomes clear, though, when we bump into verse 22: “for these are days of vengeance, as a fulfillment of all that is written.” These words indicate that the destruction of Jerusalem doesn’t ultimately lie with the power and politics of Rome. By these words, Luke is telling us that Jerusalem fell by an act of God’s divine vengeance as a way of fulfilling Scripture. There is just no way around it: these are hard words. Jerusalem, God’s holy city, and the Temple, where the very presence of God was thought to come and stand among the people – they will be destroyed by God’s hand.

Why? Why does God bring this kind of judgment, especially when it results in the death and enslavement of God's own people, and includes the suffering of vulnerable people like pregnant mothers and their unborn children and nursing mothers and their infants? What kind of a God does this?

Here is where we are going to make our first leap. And though this leap is the closest in terms of textual distance, I think this is the hardest leap to land, so help me out here by paying extra close attention.

Let's think for a couple of minutes about the way Luke tells us the story of Jesus' arrest and trial. Luke is the only Gospel writer who gives us Barabbas. Remember? Pilate declares that neither he nor Herod has found Jesus guilty of the charges presented and so Pilate suggests flogging Jesus and releasing him. The people will have none of it. Together all who have gathered there shout for the crucifixion of Jesus and the release of Barabbas. Think back to Anna when Jesus was presented in the Temple after his birth. Anna praised God and spoke about Jesus "to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Lk. 2:38). Jesus, God Incarnate, was Jerusalem's hope for salvation and redemption. But at the decisive moment of Jesus' trial, when they need to respond to the hope Jesus offers them, they reject Jesus and shout for Barabbas. They say "no" to Jesus and "yes" to Barabbas. And so Barabbas is released, and Jesus is crucified. Do you remember why Barabbas was in prison? For murder and insurrection. The people make a choice. They choose against the One who is the very redemption of Jerusalem. They choose the murdering insurrectionist. Instead of choosing the Prince of Peace, they choose insurrection. But notice this, because it is vitally important: by choosing *against* God, the people are not just choosing an eventual insurrection against Rome, which will bring about their destruction in history; by choosing *against* God, the people are choosing insurrection against God Almighty, which will bring about their destruction for all eternity. The heart of the problem, then, is not little Israel staging a rebellion against mighty Rome. The heart of the problem is human rebellion against God and God's purposes. The heart of the problem is sin.

So the destruction of Jerusalem comes about not because God is capriciously judgmental and vengeful. No, the destruction of Jerusalem comes about because of sin and God's judgment against sin. Remember that sin is not bad behavior that needs to be punished by God. "I told you, 'No hitting and no biting.' You hit and you bit, so now you're in timeout. Forever." No. Sin is alienation from God. Sin is anything that breaks right relationship with God. Anything that stands opposed to God and God's will and purposes. Sin is everything that works

against God's kingdom and works to destroy the wholeness and the well-being and the shalom that was God's original intent for all of creation. And sin will be judged. Sin is already being judged. God must judge sin because Jesus is Lord. Jesus is the first and last Word, the Alpha and the Omega. By his death and resurrection Jesus crushed the power of sin and death. Sin does not have the last word. Death does not have the last word. That Word is God's alone. And so poverty is being judged and will be judged. Oppression in all forms is being judged and will be judged. Disease of every kind in body, mind and spirit is being judged and will be judged. The sin that ensnares us and drags us down to death has been judged, is being judged, and will be fully judged and defeated when Jesus comes again. What kind of a God allows the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple? A God who is waging righteous war against anything and everything that stands opposed to God and works to harm the people of God and their relationship with God.

There's Good News here, isn't there? Perhaps we can sense it, more than see it clearly. Sin is defeated. Sin is already being judged and will be fully judged and defeated by God when Jesus returns in power and glory. This really is Good News – sin doesn't get the final word. And yet, there's still so much suffering, isn't there? Think of the catastrophes, global and personal, that have happened, just in your lifetime. Think of the suffering, the violence, the death. I know ... I know ... some of it hits really, really close to home, doesn't it? All of this pain and suffering ... Yes, human sin lies at the root of it, but still ... why doesn't God bring it to an end? Mamusha shared with us two weeks ago that the end times began when Jerusalem fell and the Temple was destroyed. That was back in AD 70. We've been living in the end times, then, for almost 2,000 years. Why doesn't Jesus return and make everything right?

To begin digging down into this question, we need to take another flying leap, this one all the way back to the pages of Genesis. We need to think for a few minutes about Noah. Noah and his ark. Have you ever wondered why God decided to use an ark to save Noah and his family? Think about it. The ark was about 450 long, 75 feet wide and 45 feet high with three floors, a roof and a door in the side. That's a big, big boat. Did you ever wonder how Noah got the job done? Sure, he had three sons, and they probably helped. Maybe he hired some men from the place where he lived. But Noah couldn't run down to the local Home Depot to buy pre-cut cypress lumber and bags full of nails. Or a power saw. Or even an extension ladder. No, he's got to find the trees, chop them down, and cut them into planks and beams. Then, when he's got all the wood, he's got to build the ark. Then cover it all over with pitch, because you definitely don't want to be springing a leak when

there's no land left anywhere. And then there's the job of rounding up all those animals. Remember – not two by two, but seven pairs of all clean animals and all birds of the air, in addition to one pair of all unclean animals (Gen. 7:2-3). You know why Noah was 600 years old when the floodwaters came on the earth? Because it took him that long to build the ark!

Why, though? Why did God go with the ark when God could have sent personalized lightning bolts for all flesh but Noah and his family and the designated animals? One big storm, lots of lightning ... problem solved! Or why not do like at the first Passover? Noah and his family put blood on the doorframe and go inside with all the animals. Okay, maybe they build a big BARN first. Then angel of death comes through the land killing all the rest of the flesh. One night, one angel ... problem solved!

But, no. God goes with the big boat. Why? Time for another leap. We have to flip to the end of the Bible to find the answer. In 1 Peter 3, we read: “For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey when **God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark**, in which a few, that is, eight person, were save through water” (1 Pet. 3:18-20).

All those days when Noah was building the ark ... those days were days of patience. Days of God's patience. Not waiting for Noah to finish the ark but waiting, waiting for his beloved people to turn back to him in obedience. It was a big boat. There was room on the ark for more people. But in the end, the people didn't turn. They were offered days ... years ... of God's patience, days and years when God tried to draw them back to faithful obedience. Peter goes on to affirm God's patience in time and beyond: “But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:8-9). Why are these end times going on so long? Because God does not want anyone to perish for all eternity but is extending these days, these end times, to bring as many as possible to repentance in Christ.

Coming back to our passage for today, we see this, don't we? Look at verse 24: “[the people of Jerusalem] will fall by the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are **fulfilled**” (Lk. 21:24). When Luke uses the word “fulfilled,” he

tends to use it in a positive way that signals the accomplishment of God's will, word and purpose in the world (e.g., Lk. 1:20, 4:21, 22:16; Acts 1:16). Here the word indicates two things: Yes, the Gentiles who come to Jerusalem in the form of Roman soldiers will act as agents of God's judgment and will reduce the city to rubble. But Luke is also pointing us forward to the story of Acts, when the Gospel of Jesus Christ will be extended to the Gentiles through the ministry of Paul in fulfillment of God's Word (e.g., Rom. 11:25-29). Jerusalem comes under God's judgment because of human sin that rejects Jesus and chooses rebellion. But even as God judges Jerusalem, God is working patiently and powerfully to bring about an abundant harvest of salvation. From the ashes of Jerusalem, despite the devastation of human sin, God will bring redemption. These days of God's judgment are also days of God's patience, days when God is at work pulling life from death, freeing us from the snare of sin, denying death its ultimate sting. Jesus is Lord, the everlasting God Almighty.

So there's Good News here. Maybe, in the context of judgment and human sin and suffering, maybe it's not the kind that makes us want to shout from the rooftops. In fact, if you think about it, for all that this text is about the end times in which you and I live, so much of what is going on is beyond our control. Either it's distant history, or cosmic convulsions, or God working in all of this to bring about redemption. So, what are we supposed to be doing? What does any of this have to do with us?

To those of us living in these end times, to those of us living amidst these days of God's patience, Jesus has one thing to say to us: “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Lk. 21:28). When these things **begin** to take place, stand up and raise your heads. Not “when you see the Son of Man coming on a cloud, stand up and raise your heads.” This isn't an invitation to stand around staring up into heaven, waiting for Jesus to return. I think Jesus is inviting us to be agents of God's patience. If we stand up straight and raise our heads in the midst of these days of God's patience, what will we see? What will we do? Jesus himself in this passage gives us two clues.

First, we want to pay attention to the word “woe” in verse 23. Woe is a word of lament. Not anger. Jesus knows that vulnerable people will be hurt by sin and its consequences. And he is filled with grief because of it. So much of his ministry was spent alongside the vulnerable. Remember how Jesus described his call in Luke 4: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery

of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Lk. 4:18-19). To disregard the vital importance of tending to the vulnerable is to miss a huge part of what Jesus' ministry was about. As agents of God's patience and redemption, we must serve the least of these. As Mamusha encouraged us last week, we must be the aroma of Christ in a hurting world.

Second, as agents of God's patience, we need to imitate Jesus in being the voice of counter-cultural truth, as Jesus does in verses 20 and 21. Back in the day, people would run into cities for protection against invading armies. How much safer must Jerusalem have seemed – the very city of God! But Jesus is giving the people advice that could literally save their lives: When they see Jerusalem being surrounded by enemy armies, they are to run out of Jerusalem. In a very concrete way, he is helping them understand that what they are putting their hope in – salvation by means of Jerusalem's sturdy walls – this will not save them. There are so many ways that we run to Jerusalem today, seeking refuge and protection in things that cannot save us – our family, our career, our financial success, our piety, our intelligence, the almighty gods of science and human progress. As agents of God's patience, we want to imitate Jesus in being the voice of counter-cultural truth for the sake of the Gospel. People need to know – so many are desperate to know – that there is hope and salvation and true peace in no one but Christ alone.

This is the hard one, isn't it? We know how to extend the love of Christ through our giving and our service. It's knowing when and how to speak up clearly for the Gospel that leaves many of us feeling unequal to the task. I will pause only to offer two ideas that are on the horizon: One, there are discipleship groups forming here at Faith in October. An explicit part of these groups is learning together how to bear faithful witness to the Gospel through missional outreach. If this tugs at your heart, watch for more information in mid-September. Two, on the more distant horizon, the Adult Christian Formation Team is just starting to dream up a course that will help us learn together practical ways to speak up for our faith in a number of different contexts. If you have any thoughts to share, let's talk.

So these words, "stand up and raise your heads," are a call to action for us. A call to make ourselves available to God as agents of God's patience in these end times. But I think there is another reason why Jesus gives us these words. I think he intends to minister to his followers through them. Because it's hard to live in end times, isn't it? On the one hand, we have faith that these days are numbered. That Jesus will come again and set all things right under his Lordship. This is our hope and we cling to it. On the other hand, even as we hope,

we live in the midst of evil days. We know the grip of disease and infirmity on our bodies. We see the pain on the faces of those we love as they suffer. We hear the news of guns and terror and starvation and ecological disaster. And it weighs us down. It brings us low. It bends us double in pain as we cry out for Jesus to come! Come and make all things right! But here we are still, in these end times.

I don't think it is by coincidence that Luke uses this particular verb for "stand up" only one other time in his gospel. It is in the story of the crippled woman. It is a Sabbath, and Jesus is in a synagogue. A woman bent over and unable to stand for 18 years comes into the synagogue. Jesus sees her and beckons her. He says to her, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." Then he lays his hands on her, and she **stands up straight** and begins to praise God (Lk. 13:10-13). If you feel bent over and unable to stand because of the pain of these end times, then receive this morning the healing touch of Jesus and hear these words that he speaks to you, his precious one, his beloved: Oh, stand up and raise your head, for indeed your redemption is drawing near! Amen.

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"The Next Step"

A Resource for Life Groups and/or Personal Application

1. Read Luke 21:20-28 again. What catches your eye? Anything make you want to *close* your eyes?
2. Contrary to first-century common sense, Jesus tells his listeners that when they see enemy troops surrounding Jerusalem, they must not run into this great city for protection. Rather, they must run out of and away from the city. Has God ever made it clear to you in your life that you were putting your trust in something that, ultimately, was not trustworthy? What did you do about it? What did God teach you through this?
3. Judgment is real! And hard! And filled with the mystery of God! Laura offered three ways that might help us think about God and God's judgment a little differently:
 - A. This week's sermon title, "Days of Patience," is drawn from 1 Peter 3:18-20. Read and reflect on these verses. How does the idea of God's being patient with humans for the sake of our salvation impact your thinking about God and God's

judgment?

B. Read and reflect on 2 Peter 3:8-9. How do these verses about human time and God time shape your thinking about the days of judgment in which we live?

C. Luke 23:18-25 gives us the people saying “yes” to Barabbas and “no” to Jesus ... a choice that eventually leads to disastrous result for Jerusalem. How does understanding judgment as the outcome of sinful human choices—tempered nonetheless by God’s mercy towards us and his grief and ultimate lordship over our sinful choices and their consequences—shape your thinking about God and God’s judgment?

4. Jesus’ “standing order” to us is that we are to be agents of God’s patience and redemption amid the judgment of these days. How do you see God working in and through you, allowing you to serve as an agent of the Lord’s divine patience and redemption through your words and deeds? In what ways do you find yourself longing to be even more of use to the Lord as an agent of God’s patience and redemption through your words and deeds? Offer your longings to the Lord in prayer.

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Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Everywhere you go, you meet people who, deep down, are sad because they don’t know that Jesus loves them. What is one thing you can say or do this week to help someone start to understand that Jesus loves them crazy big?