

23rd Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel Year C

SHIP OF THE CROSS, SHIP OF STATE

Luke 21:5-19

Twenty Third Sunday After Pentecost

Analysis by James Squire

5 When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, 6 "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." 7 They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" 8 And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them. 9 "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." 10 Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; 11 there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. 12 "But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. 13 This will give you an opportunity to testify. 14 So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; 15 for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. 16 You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of

you to death. 17 You will be hated by all because of my name. 18 But not a hair of your head will perish. 19 By your endurance you will gain your souls.

Author's Note: As Dr. Robert Bertram taught, fear is an important theme in Luke's Gospel (though perhaps not as prominent as the dialectic of lost and found). There is godly fear and then there is ungodly fear. "Do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell" (Luke 12:4-5). Those who fear the latter are met with "Do not be afraid." Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a pretty good authority for this: "His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation" (Luke 1:50). Fear God, and his mercy will reign down on you, showering you with affection and squelching your fears. There's a lot of fear in our Gospel text for this Sunday. I suspect many of us in 2019 in the United States can relate intensely to this fear. But is it a godly fear we feel?



DIAGNOSIS: Fearing Demise of Earthly Temple

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Oh No. Our Trusty Republic Is Cracking Up!

Isn't democracy grand? Now that it is slowly falling apart, tumbling to the ground stone by stone, nostalgia grips us and we appreciate its many appealing facets the way we often appreciate things in this life: only as we see them slipping away from us. We shower them with praise in a belated attempt to stop what is coming. Jesus is no comfort to us: "the days will come [in our case, are they already here?] when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down" (v. 7). Why do we ask for signs? Are we keeping score? Do we crave the insider's perspective on some grand finale, so we can position ourselves properly? We are clueless about what must happen, fearful of

being out of the loop and unable to participate properly, and oblivious to the challenges of being faithful in the midst of oppression (v. 12). We don't see any of this coming, and thus are unprepared for it when it comes. We want Jesus to perform some magic to make it all go away. Be careful, he says: many will offer just that kind of thing, but it won't be me (v. 8).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Our Republic Needs a Savior!

Yeah, yeah, Jesus. Whatever. We need something right now, some way for us to deal with what's coming (v. 7). You see, we fear change. We fear the loss of our familiar governing institutions. We see the mockery they have become (comes a snicker from the back: "Really? You're just noticing that now?"), and we want something that will save the day. Either give us the secret decoder ring, or step aside, Jesus. Well, my goodness, there are all kinds of folks who have a plan (v. 8). There's still a bunch of politicians stumping for our votes: "Put me in coach, I'm ready to win for you!" Not that they aren't sincere and qualified, mind you. But for us, they might as well have "I am he!" (or "I am she!," of course) written on their campaign buttons that they hand out, considering how much we are invested in them being the savior we need. Our greatest fear is that they aren't able to stem the tide or right the ship, which could have the unfortunate result of nation rising against nation and kingdom against kingdom (v. 10). Who knows what kind of persecution might be in store (v. 12). One of these heroes better get the job done for us or our goose is cooked for sure! We will have no words to say to make things right in that event. We will not endure (v. 19).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): We are going down with the ship

We will not endure because we have so clouded our minds with our own futile words to fling against the persecutors that we'll miss the words that Jesus will be ready to give in those moments. Of course, Jesus' words aren't designed to save our beloved institutions anyway, so what's the point? It's all going hell in a hand-basket, and who—prayer tell—is allowing it to do so? Well, it's not like Jesus didn't try to get through to us. It's almost like those institutions are destined to crumble anyway, and if we cling to them like we would to a god, then down we'll go too.

PROGNOSIS: Trusting Eternal Savior

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Jesus pilots our ship to safety

If we are really paying attention to Jesus, we might notice that he did give that Temple crowd a road map, though not the kind they were looking for. Wars and insurrections must take place, but the end will not follow immediately (v. 9). There will be all kinds of global uprisings, portents, and great signs from heaven (vv. 10-11), but before this, they will arrest you and persecute you (v. 12) because of my name. Yes, dear one: I am still hanging on to you, and because of that, they



will persecute you, but don't worry, in that moment, I will give you words to say and a wisdom that none of them will be able to withstand or contradict (v. 15). But they can't take you down to hell (the only thing you should truly fear, Luke 12:4-5), not when you're with me, kid. You see, I'm the one that's headed there in your stead to defeat all your eternal foes for you. I will be thrown down. You may think of me as great, but I will be arrested and persecuted and handed over to kings and governors, and I will be called upon to testify. The Spirit will give me the words to use. This is how I know you won't have to worry ahead of time about what to say. I will be put to death, but I will put an end to death. I will endure, and in the process, so will you. There is nothing you need to do about the coming

cataclysm except hang with me, and I'll get you through it all.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): We Climb aboard the Ship of the Cross

How refreshing it is to hear that we will be shepherded through the coming chaos by the one who endures for all of us! How calming it is to ride in the boat with Jesus at the helm commanding the elements, instead of having to invoke some earthly mojo to steer around it, as if we could somehow remain aloof and unaffected. The Spirit is with us even when the world is falling apart and rocking our boat.

With our eye on this prize, we not only avoid the outright charlatans looking to reel us in, but we also approach all serious contributors with a clear eye for their strengths and weaknesses without viewing them as messiah figures who can lead us to the promised land. We are already headed there with Jesus and his Spirit guiding us.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): We Tend to the People the Republic Is Failing

"Democracy is the worst form of government known to humanity... except for every other form of government known to humanity" – Winston Churchill. I don't think Churchill was being entirely ironic when he said this. But, for the faithful, perhaps what's really worth defending and caring for is not so much democracy itself, but the very people and ideas that democracy is supposedly tasked with protecting. Rather than gaze fondly at institutions—which were created with noble intentions—we focus on the people who those institutions were meant to uphold and inspire (if our Declaration of Independence is to be taken as sincere). Not that we should hasten the demise of those institutions in the process. Rather, we endeavor to use whatever the institutions of democracy still have to offer to advocate

and care for those who are being trampled by the system. This may well mean expanding our perspective beyond our own tribes, of course, and educating ourselves on the ways those institutions negatively impact people with whom we don't associate normally. But we don't need to ask for signs from above to do any of this. We can just roll up our sleeves and get on with it, knowing that the Spirit of Christ is with us. We derive our own lack of fear from the one who has conquered our greatest fears: Jesus Christ, our Lord. Enduring with him, we gain our souls (v. 19).