

Sermon for Advent 1, Year C Luke 21:25-36

I think most people when they hear this passage from Luke's Gospel, about distress among the nations, and the powers of the heavens being shaken – are going to respond the same way people responded when Jesus first said it. They're going to say, "Wait – WHEN is this going to happen?"

That's the question that immediately comes to *my* mind whenever I read passages from the Hebrew Bible and from the New Testament about the coming of the Messianic Age. I want to know when it's going to happen.

Jews believe that the coming of the Messiah will usher in a time when evil has been completely defeated, and peace and justice will rule. Christians believe that the Messiah has already come in the first Advent – the birth of Christ – and that the second coming of the Messiah will usher in the age of peace on earth.

The messianic age sounds wonderful, of course, but what about that time before it? The time of tribulation. That sounds pretty terrifying and far off at some point in history but then again, in many ways, it also kind of sounds like – NOW. How close is the Kingdom of God, exactly? How close are we to the second coming, the Second Advent – of Jesus? All of us would really like to know.

Jesus' teachings here in Luke are part of something called the Olivet Discourse or Olivet prophesy, where Jesus is speaking to his followers on or near the Mount of Olives shortly before the crucifixion. The same prophecies from this particular discourse in Luke also occur in Matthew and Mark, and all three of those Gospels also contain the parable of the fig tree where Jesus talks about the sprouting of leaves as a sign that summer is near.

For 2000 years, since these words were first uttered, people have been looking for signs – for those leaves on the fig tree – to try and determine when the time of tribulation on the earth will occur and then usher in the Son of Man coming in a cloud, as predicted in the book of Daniel.

We've been trying to pick apart Jesus' words, and read between the lines, to figure out what he meant when he said unsettling things like this. Some theologians believe that he was actually talking about the destruction of Jerusalem which was to occur in the year 70 AD. Certainly to the Jewish people that would seem like the end of the world. Everything they had built and cherished would be gone, and they would have to endure a long period of grief and tribulation. But then again, after the destruction of the Temple, Jesus didn't return to the earth so it's hard to view this prophecy in that light unless we choose to believe we've been in the time of tribulation since 70 AD.

People in Jesus' time believed that he was talking about the world ending within a literal generation – approximately 20 to 30 years – and many of them prepared for the Second Advent to happen in their lifetimes, but it didn't happen.

Since then, many faith leaders have claimed to know the exact day of Jesus' Second Coming and they've founded a long succession of doomsday cults that have, obviously, miscalculated.

Biblical scholars also add more confusion to the mix when they point out that the word "generation," as used here, doesn't always mean 20 or 30 years. It also can mean an age, as in an epoch, such as the Bronze Age, or the Paleolithic age. It can also mean an eon.

Another meaning of the word *genea*, which is used here, is "family," meaning a certain group of people who are connected by some sort of common bond. If we helicopter up and look at these expanded meanings of the phrase "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.", we might interpret that as the epoch of humankind. We might think that this time of tribulation will happen not in 20 or 30 years, but at the end of the entire arc of humanity's existence at some point far in the future.

But Jesus did not speak in terms of linear *chronos* time. He spoke instead of the non-linear time of God's realm which cannot be measured by human methods, and in which all things might actually be happening at the same time.

In this passage, he might be telling us something that transcends any meaning that our primitive, human minds try to glean from it. He might be talking here about a mystery that we cannot

comprehend. We are not capable of knowing what this event he is speaking about actually will entail, when it will happen, or whether it is happening to us right now. Jesus is asking us, as he usually does, to sit in the mystery that reminds us that we are not in charge. God is in charge.

All we can do while we sit in this mystery with Jesus, and trust in God's wisdom, is what Jesus instructs us to do here:

"Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

Jesus invites us, at all times, to receive him. In the midst of our busy days, in all our own personal tribulations, and amid the present tribulations of the world, Jesus reminds us to always be ready to welcome our messiah. In the multi-dimensional reality of the Divine, our God is everywhere, He draws near, he dwells deep within us, and he is everywhere – all at the same time.

If we seek every day to grow closer to our loving God, and to trust in the process that we do not fully understand we will be strengthened, as Jesus tells us, to endure whatever is to come, to raise up our heads, and know that our redemption as individuals, as a society, and as all of humankind, is always drawing near. If we remain close to God, we will always be ready.