

## **“A Fine How Do You Do”**

### **Luke 21:5-19**

A sermon preached by Fred Lyon at Flossmoor Community Church on November 14, 2010

*33<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*

The following reading of scripture is pretty alarming. It is the opening section of Luke’s version of what is sometimes referred to as the Little Apocalypse. Stirring up imagery that foretells the end times is probably not the best way to introduce oneself to a congregation—hence the sermon title, “A Fine How Do You Do.” But Luke 21:5-19 is the suggested gospel selection from the lectionary schedule for today, so there you have it.

I am not a doomsday preacher. At the same time, it is hard to sidestep the message from Luke 21:5-19. Four aspects of this passage are worth noting before we read it.

- First, the teaching of Jesus here in Luke is also found in the gospels of Mark and Matthew. Such repetition indicates how important this story was to First Century Christians as they organized what would become the New Testament witness to the ministry of Jesus.
- Second, the dire conditions described by Jesus are not necessarily unique to any one time in history—in one form or another, from one generation to the next, all humankind face times when “mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”
- Third, the matter of testifying is related to bearing witness to the good news of salvation in and through Christ. Here, ‘to testify’ can be expanded to mean something on the order of ‘to bear testimony about Jesus and his mission’.
- Fourth and most compelling is Jesus’ own fine how do you do in Luke 21:13. Here, all the unraveling does not faze Jesus in the least. If anything, he is happily counterintuitive about our prospects. Jesus sizes up the craziness with great expectation and declares, “This will give you an opportunity to bear testimony about me and my mission.” Seriously? Jesus could not be more serious.

Let us listen and look for the good news from Luke 21:5-19.

### **[A reading of the text]**

So what are we to make of Luke 21:5-19, with all of its “the center cannot hold,” “real wrath of God type stuff”? What should be our response to Jesus’ observation in verse 13 that such turbulent times will give us an opportunity to testify? Talk about a fine how do you do—what in the world kind of opportunity is Jesus offering us?

I remember the first time somebody told me that the best way to ride a rollercoaster is to sit in the first car and throw your arms up in the air with every downhill rush of the ride. Simply imagining this scenario sent me into a panic, which led me to further conclude that the guy offering this advice was just plain nuts.

Jesus, of course, is not just plain nuts. But there are times when his teaching borders on a certain divine madness that gives one pause. The opportunity to witness offered by Jesus is one of these times.

Interestingly enough, ‘opportunity’ is translated from the Greek word, *apobainō*, which literally refers to stepping down, or disembarking, from a ship—something you do in a harbor. Moreover, the English word ‘opportunity’ is rooted in the Latin word *opportunus*, which means ‘toward port’ or ‘facing harbor’. The underlying assumption in all of this is that ports provide tranquil conditions for getting securely on shore to pursue possibilities.

But the opportunity Jesus describes involves no such tranquility or security. If anything, the harbor waters are being roiled by a maelstrom of global and cosmic proportions. Then there is the further matter that the Greek word for ‘testify’ has roots in the same term from which we derive the English word ‘martyr’. So when it comes to Luke 21:13, a not so loose translation could read something like this: “The end of the world as we know it will give you an opportunity to be a martyr for me.”

Any volunteers?

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Why does Jesus view all of this as an opportunity? Maybe it has to do with Jesus knowing a thing or two about faithfully navigating daunting prospects. In his letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul quotes this early Christian hymn:

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
who, who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-11)*

The Word did not become flesh to save us from tranquil waters. Christ entered a world already rife with the tempestuous circumstances described in Luke 21:5-19; tempestuous circumstances that, to one extent or another, have been experienced by the human race in every age, including our own. Forget the end times, our right now times have tumult to spare while providing precious little safe harbor from which to pursue opportunities to bear witness.

Every generation contends with portents of darkness. But here’s the thing: Christ is the light shining in the darkness, which the darkness did not, does not, and shall not overcome. Christ is the light that gives us the spiritual wherewithal to pursue opportunities to testify even in—and perhaps especially in—the craziest dark times we can imagine.

Because of this, it is my belief that the true safe harbor from which to pursue opportunities to testify is not a place, but a presence. Our true safe harbor is the presence of the loving power and powerful love of Christ equipping us to participate more fully in God’s

will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Maybe when we realize this we will understand more fully that daunting opportunities are exactly what the Spirit of our risen Christ has been preparing us for all along.

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Jesus speaks boldly of opportunity because he knows that the craziest earthly circumstances cannot prevail over the divine madness of God's abiding love for us. We, too, know something about this dynamic ourselves. At one time or another most—if not all—of us have gone toe to toe with the falling apart of profound despair, grief, loss, suffering. Yet, we have come through such turbulence because even in—perhaps particularly in—the depths of anguish we also have experienced the loving power and powerful love of Christ's presence in our lives, especially whenever we have been surrounded and upheld by sisters and brothers in Christ who refuse to abandon us in our sorrow.

Time and time again amid the Christian life we share in and as the body of Christ, we have grown in our own understanding that the craziest earthly circumstances cannot prevail over the divine madness of God's abiding love for us. And because of this abiding love, we have been spiritually equipped with the quirky confidence to declare such bold words of assurance as:

- *Behold I tell you a mystery, we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be transformed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.*
- *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*
- *Rejoice in the Lord, always, again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone---the Lord is near.*
- *All we go down to the dust, yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!*

These are more than fancy words to memorize—they are the substance of the faith, hope, and love through which the living presence of Christ gives us the spiritual wherewithal to thrive no matter how much the world unravels around us. More than fancy words to memorize, these are fortifying words that will undergird our capacity to bear witness to Jesus and his mission.

Much speculation is given to the point in this passage when Jesus teaches: “So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.” This may seem to make the opportunity to testify even more daunting.

But we already have all the words we need. I have just shared some of these words. We know many more. Yet what matters most here is how these words get into us, how they become a vital part of our identity, how we give them full expression in the living of our lives.

We already have all the words we need. The question is: Will we give them full expression in the living of our lives, personally and as a community of faith. The only thing holding us back from living these words out loud is our reluctance to do so. Jesus points us

in the direction of an opportunity to be more resolute in bearing testimony—and aligning our lives—to him and his mission of faith, hope, and love. And no matter how tranquil or tempestuous the times may be, now is always the time to give full expression to Christ alive in our lives. Because more than a **fine how do you do**, the opportunity to testify poses a **faithful what will we do** for the sake of affirming the good news of the gospel.

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As you size up whether you think it wise to call me as your next senior pastor, let me share more personally where I stand on a passage such as Luke 21:5-19. Well, let me start by confessing that over the years I have come to the conclusion that the only way to ride a roller coaster is in the first car with your hands way up in the air.

One of our family's favorite films to watch together is "Miracle," which is about the United States' hockey team winning the gold medal back in 1980. The United States' coach, Herb Brooks, gives a simple but stirring pep talk before the game when they upset the Soviet Union. His opening words are: "Great moments are born of great opportunity." I agree, especially when it comes to opportunities to which Christ calls us.

Then Brooks says three sentences that make this particular Calvinist weak in the knees.

*You were born to be hockey players—every one of you.*

*And you were meant to be here tonight.*

*This is your time.*

I have no idea what all of our respective athletic propensities happen to be, but when it comes to our basic humanity, we were born to be children of God, every one of us. When it comes to being part of the body of Christ, we are meant to be here. And when it comes to responding to opportunities Christ places before us, this is our time.

Another family favorite is the Lord of the Rings trilogy. In the third movie of the trilogy, The Return of the King, the heroes of the Fellowship of the Ring face insurmountable odds against a horde of enemies. Just before the battle gets underway, the brave dwarf Gimli sizes up the situation: "Certainty of death. Small chance of success. What are we waiting for?"

So what are we waiting for? Now is our time. Thanks be to God for the opportunity.