

Twenty-Sixth Sunday After Pentecost
Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19

Citizens of the Kingdom of God*

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According to the great theologian Karl Barth, a good preacher should always have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. This advice seems particularly relevant after all the news about Tuesday's election.

Over the last four days, I've heard from a number of parishioners at Transfiguration who are feeling sad, afraid, confused, and angry. Perhaps you are one of them. Perhaps you are not. Regardless of how you feel about the election, however, it's important for us to reflect upon what the Word of God has to say to us today.

As some of you may know, our preaching rotation is scheduled several months in advance. A few weeks ago, I was looking at today's Gospel reading from St. Luke. I asked myself, how in the world am I going to preach on a passage that seems so frightening and apocalyptic?

In that passage, Jesus tells the people around him that the Jerusalem temple – the center of religious life in Ancient Israel – will be destroyed. He says that “not one stone will be left upon another” and that “all will be thrown down.”

If you know anything about the temple, you might imagine how absurd Jesus' words must have sounded to his listeners. The temple was an enormous building of amazing construction and great beauty. It was the place in which God dwelled. The notion that it would one day be destroyed was unthinkable.

And yet, in 70 C.E. – only forty years after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension – the temple was destroyed by the Roman Empire.

In today's Gospel passage, Jesus also talks about nations and kingdoms rising against each other, arrests and persecutions, betrayals by relatives and friends, people being hated, and “dreadful portents” and “signs from heaven.” Cheerful stuff, right?

Just a few weeks ago, the things described in today's Gospel passage sounded unthinkable and absurd to me. Today, following last Tuesday's election, these things seem within the realm of possibility – particularly in light of the pastoral needs of our fellow parishioners.

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So what does Jesus teach us to do in the face of all these apocalyptic things? Three things. Courage. Wisdom. Patience.

Courage. Jesus tells us in today's Gospel passage: "Do not be terrified." If there is one core teaching in the Bible, it is to be courageous. Be not afraid. The word "fear" appears in the Bible almost 500 times. But if we trust in God, not a hair of our head will perish. Last weekend, a number of us from Transfiguration attended the annual convention of the Diocese of New York. Bishop Dietsche told us that, regardless of the results of the election, there will continue to be disciples of Christ Jesus in our nation. "How, then," he said, "can we be afraid?"

Wisdom. It may seem impossible at times to know what to say in the face of dreadful portents and apocalyptic signs from heaven. Will we have the wisdom to respond to the future with all of its uncertainty? How do we respond to our friends and loved ones who are afraid of being deported or losing their health care? And yet, as Jesus tells us, we need not prepare our defense in advance. At the right time, God will give us the words and wisdom to respond to whatever challenges come our way.

Patience. Jesus teaches us to be patient and to endure in the face of adversity. Indeed, the story of Christianity over the last two thousand years is one of overcoming persecution, betrayal, and hatred. Like the apostles and the earliest Christians – as well as contemporary martyrs like Bonhoeffer, King, and Romero – we will be given the gift of endurance. And by our endurance, we will gain our souls.

Courage. Wisdom. Patience. Three critical things to remember in these challenging times. And they are just as relevant today as they were in Jesus' time.

In the end, we are not just citizens of the United States of America or any other country. By virtue of our baptism, we are citizens of the Kingdom of God. Indeed, we heard about this – our heavenly commonwealth – during today's morning prayer reading from Paul's Letter to the Philippians. That is a citizenship, passport, green card, or visa that can never be taken away from us.

Let us never lose hope in the beautiful vision from today's first reading from the Book of Isaiah. One day, we will have a new heaven and a new earth. One day, the sound of weeping and the cries of distress will be no more. One day, the wolf and the lamb will feed together. And one day, nothing will be hurt or destroyed in God's holy realm.