

Facing the End
Isaiah 65:17 – 25; Luke 21:5 – 19
Sunday, November 17, 2019

Did you know that the world was supposed to end on Monday? A man named Tony Elliott released a series of videos online in which he said that the world had gotten *so bad* that the planet would no longer be able to bear the weight of the pain and suffering that is taking place. So at 7:27 AM on Monday, November 11, the tectonic plates would collapse, causing lava to spew out all over the face of the earth, killing everyone. Well, we're all still here, and the videos have been conveniently *taken down*, but he has said that a *new* video (and presumably a new *prediction* about when the world is *really* going to end) is coming on December 14.

We hear stories like this all the time – people who, through their study of either science or scripture, claim to know when the world is going to end. About eight years ago, there was a man named Harold Camping who said that the world was going to end at 6 PM Eastern Time on May 21, 2011. He had a church and a radio show, and he convinced all of his followers that they needed to get ready. So all these people sold their houses, quit their jobs, took their life savings and spent it on advertising warning others to get ready for the second coming of Christ. May 21 came and went with no end of the world, and Harold Camping said, “I must have made a mistake with my calculations and interpretation of scripture,” while all these people who trusted him were left with no homes or jobs or money. And the worst part is, he had actually done this *before*. In 1994 he had convinced people that Christ was coming back *then*, and when it didn't happen, he said, “My calculations were off. It's actually May 21, 2011.” And people believed him again! All these people were so focused on the *end* that they stopped living *this life*.

Jesus obviously says here that “many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them.” But there is something in a lot of people that is *drawn* to this. We

see the pain and suffering of the world around us, and we want to somehow make *sense* of it. “Things are getting worse and worse; it must be building up to an end!” And people become so consumed with the world and the life to *come* that they stop caring about *this* world and *this* life. But what Jesus and Isaiah are both talking about here is *not* the end of the world; how things are getting worse and worse, so God is going to take us away from all of the suffering and pain. What Jesus is focused on is not *escaping* suffering and pain, but *how we live faithfully in the mist of suffering and pain*.

Our reading from Isaiah takes place at a time when the people of Israel are coming back from exile in Babylon. This foreign army had invaded Israel and destroyed their *homes*, destroyed the *temple*, and either took *captive* or just *killed* the people. After enduring almost 200 years of suffering and exile, the people of Israel are finally returning home. But the home that they’re coming *back* to is *decimated*. It’s in *ruins*. The walls around Jerusalem that protected them are rubble, so they have to rebuild them. They have to rebuild their homes. They have to rebuild the temple, the place where God *lived*, where they believed God’s presence *physically resided*. They have to rebuild their *lives*. This isn’t like, “Oh, yay, *that’s* over, so everything is good and back to normal again!” There was a long haul ahead of them.

So they are focused on how they are going to rebuild all of this that took so long to build in the first place. And it’s in the midst of *that* that God says, “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth. The former things – all those things that happened to you, all the pain and suffering you’ve had to endure – will not even be remembered or come to mind because you’re going to be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating. For I am about to create Jerusalem as a *joy* and its people as a *delight*. (There wasn’t a whole lot of *joy* or *delight* in Jerusalem at that time. There was just *pain* and *suffering*.) No more shall the sound of weeping be heard or the cry of distress.

No more shall there be an infant that lives but a few days or an old person who does not live to 100. You are going to build houses and *live* in them. You're going to plant fields and *eat their fruit*. You're not going to build and plant and someone else comes in and takes it all, like what you've just gone through. You and your children and *their* children will be *blessed*. And not only *that*, but the *wolf* is going to eat with the *lamb*, and the *lion* will eat straw like the *ox*, and *no one* will hurt or destroy on my holy mountain."

God is saying, "I'm not just going to help you rebuild the bricks and mortar. I'm going to do something *so much bigger!* I'm going to transform *this whole world* – heaven and earth. I'm going to make it all new, so that there's no more suffering and pain and violence and death." And the thing that we often *miss* here is that God doesn't say, "*You're* going to do this," or, "*We're* going to do this." God says, "*I* am going to do this, and all *you* have to do is trust me."

This is echoed in what Jesus says in Luke's gospel. In the time since Isaiah, they *have* rebuilt the temple. Jesus is there, and people are talking about how *great* the temple is, and Jesus says, "The days will come when not one stone is left upon another; all will be thrown down." Well, the people start asking him, "When will this *be?*" It actually *did* happen about 40 years later, in the year 70 AD; the Romans destroyed the temple again. But Jesus doesn't tell them that. There are other places in the gospels where Jesus says, "It is not for you to know the day or the time." And *here*, Jesus says, "Don't listen to those who tell you they *do* know."

Then Jesus goes into this whole part where he talks about wars and insurrections, nation rising against nation and kingdom against kingdom, earthquakes, famines, and plagues. He tells them they will be arrested and persecuted and even killed. But he's still not answering their question. He's not saying to them, "When these things happen, *that's* your sign; *that's* when the temple

will be destroyed, and the end will come.” That’s not why he’s saying this. What he’s saying here is almost like all of these things are a natural result of living in this world and following him. It’s like Michael Wilson talked about last Sunday when Jesus said, “I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.” What happens to lambs when they are surrounded by wolves? They get slaughtered! I don’t know about you, but I didn’t sign up for that!

Following Jesus does not assure us of a life *free* from challenges and suffering and pain. I mean, Jesus tells us to *take up our cross and follow him* and that *those who want to save their life will lose it*. Nowhere does Jesus promise us that a life of faith will be easy and free from pain. He says here, “These things *must take place*.” But what he *also* says is, “When you hear about it, *do not be afraid*. Because I am with you, and I will give you the words to speak. Not a hair on your head will perish. And by your *endurance* you will gain your *souls*.” Jesus isn’t telling them here how to *avoid* or *escape* suffering and pain. He’s telling them how to live faithfully in the midst of suffering and pain. And what he’s saying here is the same thing that God said to the people of Israel through Isaiah – “*I am going to do this. I am going to take care of you and lead you through this. All you have to do is trust me.*”

This has been a hard year in the life of our church. We have shared suffering and pain and loss together. We have lost people we loved, either through dying or moving away. We have shared the experience of having one of our pastors sick and not able to be a part of the everyday life of our church. Just a lot of unknown, uncertain territory that we’ve had to traverse together. And Jesus tells us, “These things must take place.” This is just how life goes. This is what happens when you love one another so deeply and share life together in a community centered around Christ; we bear one another’s burdens and feel the pain of life deeply. The only way to *not* feel that pain is not to *love*, and that’s no way to go through life.

But what I have seen out of you this year is not an *avoidance* of that pain or an attempt to escape it. Sure, it would have been “easier” to say, “This situation with Ridgley is just too hard. It’s easier to just let her go and move on.” Or, “It’s too hard to be around this family that is suffering this terrible loss, so I’m just not going to do that.” Or, “It’s too hard to say goodbye to this friend who is moving away.” But you didn’t do that. In the midst of all of this, I have seen you *trusting God*. And that trust has allowed you to *endure* the challenges and pain that we have had to face and to *love one another* through it all. And maybe through enduring all of that, we have found our *soul* as a church.

It is precisely the moments of suffering and pain in life that provide opportunities for us to bear witness to the love of Jesus Christ and our faith in him.

And what I am here to tell you today is that the end *is* coming. It is coming next Sunday! Not the end of the *world*, I have no inside knowledge of that. Next Sunday is the end of the church year. The world around us measures a year from January 1 to December 31. But in the life of the church, we order our lives by a liturgical calendar that tells the story of Jesus; it *begins* with the first Sunday of Advent and *ends* with Christ the King Sunday. We *begin* our year anticipating the coming of Jesus Christ, and we *end* our year celebrating that Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords. And next Sunday is Christ the King Sunday. Next Sunday we will gather here to proclaim that Jesus Christ rules and reigns over heaven and earth; that there is no part of this world or our lives that is outside the power and authority of Jesus Christ. We will celebrate that, and then we will move into a new year. A new beginning. A chance to start over, as we pray for Christ to be born in new ways into this world and into our lives.

That new year will undoubtedly bring challenges and pain of its own. These things must take place. But the promise that we have as we move into it is that we are not alone. We have each other. And *God* is with us, guiding us toward this future in which God is making all things new. All we have to do is *trust*.