

War and Peace: Luke's Apocalyptic Jesus

Maeve Hammond | 13 November 2022

1800+ words/12 minutes including Prayer for Illumination

Good morning, everyone. I am so happy and grateful to be here on my first Sunday at First Congregational Church in Winchester. I have felt so honored to be called to serve here—and I truly do feel that my placement is a calling. I felt so much clarity at the beginning of and throughout the search process that *this* was the community God was leading me to serve. It's been a joy to meet so many folks in many ministries and committees, and I'm so looking forward to meeting the rest of you—hopefully today at coffee hour, if you can make it. Thank you for welcoming me into this lovely and inspiring community. I can't wait to see where the Spirit leads us together.

As some of you know, I come from a Presbyterian tradition. Before we preach, we typically say a Prayer for Illumination, in which we ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate our reading of the text and envision God's Word more clearly. If you'd join me, I invite you to pray with me: Holy Creator, we ask you to be present as we discern Your Word and make meaning beyond the pages of Your sacred text into the facets of our own lives. Amen.

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So, today, we are going to be talking about impending apocalyptic destruction. This probably isn't what you wanted to hear on the first Sunday of a new minister's appointment, but here we are. But, I promise, if you stick with me, we will find good news out of the doom and gloom.

Our Scripture has a rich, genre tradition of apocalyptic literature. What comes to mind when you think of the word "apocalypse?" Maybe you envision fire or the Four Horsemen—at any rate, you probably imagine an unfolding of chaos. The word "apocalypse" actually means "revelation," which may ring a bell if you've read the last book of the New Testament. In fact, scholars in the environmental humanities and postcolonial studies have pointed to the Book of Revelation and other apocalyptic parts of Scripture as textual witnesses to very present cultural devastation. Apocalyptic passages in Scripture tend to follow a pattern: through symbols, signs, and mystery, a divine being announces a revelation and encourages listeners to recognize the tragedy and turn back to God. This revelation is focused on eschatology, or, as commentator and minister Fred Craddock put it, "the end of the world as we know it" (243). Craddock continues, saying, "As strange as this literature may seem to us, it is a dramatic witness to the tenacity of faith and hope among the people of God...Amid painful and prolonged suffering...faith turns its face toward heaven not only for a revelation of God's will but also for a

vision of the end of the present misery and the beginning of the age to come” (243). Writer Jonathan Lear calls accepting tragic destruction and then envisioning a new future “radical hope.” Let’s keep that term in mind going forward: *the radical hope that apocalypse provides*.

From the Book of Daniel and the Dead Sea Scrolls to Paul’s insistence that he received his gospel “by revelation” in Galatians, apocalypse appears throughout our tradition (Craddock 243). Cultural crises tended to prompt apocalyptic writing (Craddock 243). In today’s New Testament reading, Luke 21:5-19, Jesus foretells the destruction of the Temple. To understand why Jesus may be speaking to his followers with an apocalyptic tone, we should reflect on the cultural and religious importance of the Temple to Jewish folks in the first century CE. There are actually two Temples to consider. King Solomon constructed and consecrated the First Temple in the 10th century BCE (2 Chronicles). The First Temple stood in Jerusalem on Mount Zion. *The Jewish Study Bible* describes the Temple, which I want you to imagine, as “a luxurious house in which the people worshiped God who dwelled within as a king resided in his palace” (Hurowitz 2013). People would walk in courtyards, priests would serve God in the outer sanctum, and “[God] would sit in [the] throne room with supernatural creatures guarding the entrance” (Hurowitz 2013). The most important place of the Temple “stored tablets of the covenant attesting to the special relationship between the Divine resident and the people of Israel who built the house” (Hurowitz 2013). This Temple stood until it was destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in 586 BCE (Hurowitz 2012). Nothing remains of the First Temple, except for the psalmic and scriptural renderings of lament and loss after this destruction. However, not all hope was lost, of course: by decree of Cyrus the Great, the Second Temple in Jerusalem was built about 60 years later between 520 and 515 BCE (Lipschits 2115).

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus describes the war between Jews and Romans in 66 CE and the Romans’ eventual destruction of the Second Temple by 70 CE (Craddock 245). Keep in mind that the Gospel of Luke was written between 80 and 85 CE, so ten to fifteen years after the destruction of the Second Temple. In this passage, Jesus mentions three occurrences that coincide with this destruction: false messiahs and calculations of time, wars, and natural disasters (Craddock 244). Jesus’ followers will inevitably suffer during this time. The people they love and hold in power will betray and accuse them. They will be hated. Some will be put to death, as we see in Acts. But, Christ says, “not a hair of your head will perish” (v. 18). In other words, this will be an apocalyptic time of witness, but not terror. Again, I want you to imagine what it would be like for you if you heard these words. You carry the historical legacy and heritage of cultural devastation, war, and lamentation after the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians, an attack on your ancestors from hundreds of years ago. Now, you’re faced

with that attack in your own lifetime, perhaps something that you didn't think imaginable despite the Roman empire's increased hostility over the years. I'd imagine that it would be hard for me to find the hope and not lean into terror, despite Christ's reassurance.

Let's compare Jesus' message and tone in Luke with the other gospels. First, let's be clear that Luke's account of Jesus' words details the destruction of the Second Temple but *not* the clear end of the world—unlike the Gospel of Mark, whose description invokes the imminence of the end of the world (Miller 117). The Gospel of John, however, actually eliminates apocalyptic messages (Ehrman 266). The Gospel of Thomas, an extra-canonical text and the latest of these sources, actually argues *against* an apocalyptic arrival of the Kingdom of God at the end of the world (Ehrman 266). Although there is existential weight and cosmic consequence to the destruction of the Second Temple, Jesus is not warning of an end to the world—only *the end of the world as we know it*.

New Testament scholar Bart D. Ehrman writes, “some of the earliest traditions about Jesus portray him as a Jewish apocalypticist who responded to the political and social crises of the day...[by proclaiming] a Kingdom of God that is soon to appear, in which God will rule” (265). Remember that Jesus' ministry began apocalyptically with his associate with John the Baptist. As we know, Jesus' teachings threatened the stability of the status quo and the Roman empire—moral teachers weren't labeled dangerous prophets or crucified unless they jeopardized social order. Christ brought the revelation of radical hope to his people—and that was scary to the authority. And, radical hope coincided with the unfortunate reality of apocalyptic destruction.

When I was thinking of titles for this sermon, the words “war and peace” kept coming to mind. I think these words, just like apocalyptic destruction and radical hope, both contrast and complement each other. They are diametrically opposed, yet one cannot live without the other. Without war, we would not really know peace. Without apocalypse, as Jesus and other prophetic voices from Scripture describe, we would not know radical hope. Now, I want to be very clear that I do not personally subscribe to a theology of suffering. That is, I don't believe that everything happens for a reason. I don't believe that human beings *must* suffer to understand the fullness of life or receive divine clarity or knowledge. I actually understand suffering and destruction as social problems, and my God is present to walk beside us in the midst of chaos and despair as a voice of comfort and hope. (You'll soon notice that this is the basis for a *lot* of my sermons.) God's heart breaks for us when we are suffering; God does not cause suffering. I think this is also important to mention as we consider the legacy of war and violence in our country and fought by and against our country in the larger world. Last week was

election week, and I'm sure many of us anxiously awaited results. On Friday, we recognized Veterans' Day. Today, we've heard and will continue to hear about cosmic and personal harm.

So, we know that suffering and peace go hand-in-hand and that they necessarily exist through together, even if we don't want them to, even if it's scary to admit that truth. We know from Scripture *and* from books like *The Body Keeps the Score* that suffering is kind of like a slow burn. Trauma is stored within our bodies, within the stories that we tell each other and ourselves, within the legacy of our communities, our families, our bloodlines. Even when we move past the inciting incident that caused trauma, it's not like the trauma just "goes away." No, the suffering tends to stay with us, emerge at inopportune moments, and impact our decisions, our perspectives, and our perception of ourselves and our realities. And, sometimes, when we *think* we should finally be at a place of peace, it actually feels impossible to access it. We ask ourselves, where is the peace? When will the suffering end? Will I have to always be on the lookout for another destruction of my stability, of my Temple?

I think what Jesus is telling us here is, yes, suffering is very real. War is real. War upon our bodies, our beliefs, our very existence. War and suffering will be present and active, and, unlike this passage in Luke, we will not always get the warning. However, Christ's good news is, as it always almost is, one of peace and the possibility for rebuilding and new life. There's a line from one of my favorite musicians, dodie, that reminds me of this message: "I promise you it will all make sense again." I'd imagine first-century Jews and followers of Christ did not want to make sense of the destruction of the Second Temple and the promise of impending suffering. But, Christ promises us "by your endurance you will gain your souls" (v. 19). Through and out of suffering, we have the promise of returning to ourselves and returning to a state of peace. As we leave today, let us take comfort in the eventuality of radical hope, even in the midst of the wars that rage inside our minds and hearts and communities. Know that support is there when you feel peace is so far from even imaginable when the world you knew has ended. Know that Christ's good news is one of sense again. Amen.

Works Cited/Consulted

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The Complete Gospels (Robert J. Miller)

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“Secret for the Mad” (dodie)