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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

November 16, 2025

Proper 28, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary

Malachi 4:1-2a

Psalm 98

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19

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Back when I lived in Moscow as a teenager in the 1990s, I went to visit the All-Russia Exhibition Center. This was a kind of World's Fair-type complex created back in the 1930s to showcase the Soviet Union's achievements: cultural, economic, agricultural, technological. The grounds are bigger than the country of Monaco. But as I walked them in the 90s, they were unkept. Old, outmoded sculptures of heroic workers and ruddy smiling peasants with their hammer-and-sickle emblems in hand sagged and corroded.

Now I'm told that President Putin has since spiffed the place back up, in line with his more recent ideology of Russian greatness. But when I was there what I experienced was desolation in what had been a place of prosperity and power, the showcase of one of the world's two great superpowers. How hard it would have been to imagine it that way in 1960, or 1980.

It must have been that hard or even harder for Jesus' listeners to imagine the Temple destroyed. What great stones! What great buildings! The white marble shone, the smoke from the daily sacrifices billowed. It was only a few decades since Herod the Great had massively expanded the complex. And yet even by the time Luke was writing his gospel, a Judean revolt had led to a brutal Roman retaliation and Jesus' prediction of destruction had come true.

I remember sitting in a college dorm glued with horror to a TV screen as I watched the World Trade Center crumble in 2001. The events of September 11 were so traumatic because of the numbers of people who died, certainly, but also because symbolically they represented the vulnerability of what had seemed invulnerable: two immense, proud, seemingly immovable buildings, representing a proud and dynamic city, the financial and cultural capital of the world, and a nation that was by then the only remaining superpower. Buildings are symbolic of even bigger realities: our stories, our identities.

Since 2001 we have continued to see our world change, and often, our stories and institutions with it. And there are times when we might see things around us changing and ending and feel like Jesus' words apply to us. The Episcopal priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "It's easy enough to see why some people think history is drawing to a close. All you have to do is hold a newspaper in one hand and Luke's gospel in the other. 'Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom.' Check." Afghanistan, Iraq, Russia, Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, perhaps next Venezuela? "Great earthquakes." Well, we haven't had a big one here in a while, but our siblings in Turkey and Haiti and Indonesia can speak of theirs, and maybe we're due. "Plagues." Does a worldwide pandemic count? Check.

“Parents and siblings, relatives and friends” turned against one another. Many can identify with that line at Thanksgiving tables as this country’s politics and relational fabric continue to degenerate.

Sometimes people respond to great changes and endings by becoming fascinated with end-times prophecies and speculating about ideas like the rapture and the millennium and the tribulation and wondering if the end of the world might occur in their own days. But a lot of these theologies are cobbled together from a few scattered verses and don’t do justice to what scripture itself says about the future. Certainly in this gospel passage Jesus doesn’t give us any encouragement to be armchair end-times forecasters. In fact it seems like it’s the people he’s speaking to that assume the calamities he’s talking about mean the end of the world. But Jesus clearly says, “These things must take place, but the end is not following immediately.” He says not to follow false Messiahs who say “the time is near.”

It’s as if he’s trying to dial down our panic and instead give us a dose of realism about what life in this world is like. It is always the end of the world somewhere, for someone. Today the world is ending for someone whose house has been bombed, someone who has received a terminal diagnosis, someone who has been abandoned by the one they loved and trusted most in the world. For us as individuals and for us collectively as societies, endings and cataclysms are not the exception, they are part of life. Wars, disasters, unforeseen calamity: I wonder whether there has ever been a time in history that *didn’t* fit the signs of the times. So I think what God is offering us in these scriptures is not a warning about how to escape from an imminent end, but a message about how to live in the meantime—because it is always the meantime.

And in the meantime, Jesus says: Do not be afraid. Hold fast. God is still God. Don't be surprised when suffering comes. Don't put your trust in the structures of power, big buildings or strong armies or stable governments or prosperous economies, because those things will all someday fall away. After all, God's greatest victory was won not by riding into Jerusalem at the head of an army but by dying on a cross. We will hear that story next Sunday, the last Sunday before Advent, the day sometimes called Christ the King, the end of this church year. Our lives are full of endings. But in Christ there is no ending, only new beginnings. He promises not to protect us from every kind of suffering but that even when we suffer not a hair of our head will be lost because our true lives are safe in God.

The day of the Lord is coming, Jesus says. Watch. Wait. Be faithful. For all things pass away; but God is making all things new.