

Luke 21:25–36

Sunday's Gospel: Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

²⁵ “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth nations will be in dismay, perplexed by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶ People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. ²⁸ But when these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand.” [²⁹ He taught them a lesson. “Consider the fig tree and all the other trees. ³⁰ When their buds burst open, you see for yourselves and know that summer is now near; ³¹ in the same way, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Amen, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.] ³⁴ “Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life, and that day catch you by surprise ³⁵ like a trap. For that day will assault everyone who lives on the face of the earth. ³⁶ Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Context in Advent

The season of Advent (Latin for “coming to”) begins with a look to the future coming (*parousia* in Greek) of the Son of Man. (n.b.: the phrase “second coming” doesn't occur in scriptures!) One wonders why this would be the first gospel of Advent for this year. Shouldn't we be looking ahead to the coming of Jesus as a baby in Bethlehem? The subsequent Sundays in Advent for this year do exactly that. I would suggest that the Church wants to remind us that the coming promised is already and continuing to be here. In *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*, by N. T. Wright suggests that the “reappearing” of Jesus might be a better phrase -- and one that was used by some early Christians.

“He is, at the moment, present with us, but hidden behind that invisible veil which keeps heaven and earth apart, and which we pierce in those moments, such as prayer, the sacraments, the reading of scriptures, and our work with the poor, when the veil seems particularly thin. But one day the veil will be lifted; earth and heaven will be one: Jesus will be personally present, and every knee shall bow at his name; creation will be renewed; the dead will be raised; and God's new world will at last be in place, full of new prospects and possibilities.” (p. 219)

With that in mind, let us consider Scripture apart from its Lectionary usage.

Context in Scripture

This reading is taken from Luke's gospel just following Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Jesus' confrontation with the authorities in the Temple (which began back at 19:47, the cleansing of the Temple) now shifts to the future tense. This extended section (19:47–21:38) concerns

- the coming persecutions and the destruction of the Temple (21:5–19),
- the destruction of Jerusalem (21:20–24), and
- the coming of the Son of Man (21:25–36) – *our Sunday gospel*.

Luke's third prediction of Jerusalem's fall is by far the most detailed discourse (the others come in 13:34-35; 19:41-44). What immediately strikes current readers is that this all seems very apocalyptic, every end-of-the-world such as the popular *Left Behind* fiction. Yet, Luke's text contains only a few of the standard elements of apocalyptic literature, e.g., some cosmic imagery; but omits many others, e.g., hero from the past who seals up the vision until a future date, heavenly interpreter of the visions. In addition, it is not a final word of Jesus, but introduces his suffering and death. On the other hand, it

contains several characteristics of apocalyptic thought: a deterministic and pessimistic view of history, anticipation of the end of the world in some great and imminent crisis, visions of cosmic upheaval.

Brian Stoffregen provides a brief, simplistic, yet enlightening description of the purposes of prophetic, wisdom, and apocalyptic literatures. While they all have a future component, they are primarily concerned about the present.

prophetic literature

Present time is one of suffering

Why? The people have sinned.

Future may be a time of blessing if the people repent.

Purpose: call the people to repent and change their ways in the present time

wisdom literature

Present time may be one of blessing or suffering

Why? Cause and effect system: Blessed if do right -- suffer if do wrong

Future depends on continued righteousness or unrighteousness

Purpose: encourage the people to continue or start living righteously in the present

apocalyptic literature

Present time is one of suffering

Why? The world is under evil powers who afflict the faithful

Future: a reversal of fortunes: the faithful righteous who suffer now, will be rewarded; and the godless unrighteous who bring suffering to others, will suffer (usually in a different or recreated world)

Purpose: encourage the people to continue their faithfulness and patience during the present suffering

With that in mind, one might be less certain of the literary type of Luke's passage. For in any case, in looking at our text, we need to keep in mind at least three time references. (1) The time of Jesus when he spoke these words, which was prior to the destruction of the temple. (2) The time of Luke when he wrote these words (and his hearers heard them), which was after the destruction of the temple. (3) The present time of our hearers, who live centuries after the events recorded in the discourse.

That reference of time will move the emphasis and accent with which the hearer listens. In large part, as Stoffregen point out, the discourse makes several points:

- First, Luke clearly shows how the destruction of A.D. 70 is distinct from but related to the end. The two events should not be confused, but Jerusalem's destruction, when it comes, will guarantee as well as display the end, since one event mirrors the other. Both are a part of God's plan as events move toward the end.
- Second, Jesus' prophetic character is highlighted by this section. God is speaking through Jesus about unfolding events in the plan.
- Third, the Jewish nation's fate was clearly tied to its reaction to Jesus. The reader is not to question that the events Jesus describes will result from the nation's failure to respond to him (19:41-44). In fact, if one were to ask why Jerusalem was being judged, Luke has given many reasons. It is filled with hypocrisy (11:37-54), has oppressed the poor (18:7; 20:47), has rejected Messiah (13:33-34; 20:13-18), has missed the day of visitation (19:44), has rejected the gospel (Acts 13:46-48; 18:5-6; 28:25-28) and has slain God's Son (Luke 9:22; 18:31-33; 19:47; 20:14-19; 22:1-2, 52; 23:1-25).

- Fourth, the passage offers reassurance to disciples that God will enable them to face persecution and deliver them from it, whether by giving them words to say in their own defense or by saving them after martyrdom.
- Fifth, the call is to remain steadfast because God is in control.

So, the discourse offers information and exhortations. It provides a general outline but not a detailed, dated calendar of future events. Such a general portrait without detailed dates is a common form for biblical prophetic and apocalyptic material. Even though the portrait Jesus gives is general, he is saying, in effect, here in the present: “Rest assured, God’s plan is being fulfilled.”

Commentary

²⁵ “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth nations will be in dismay, perplexed by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶ People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. ²⁸ But when these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand.”

Only Luke uses the word “signs” in this section. The same word was used earlier in the question “Teacher, when will this happen? And what sign will there be when all these things are about to happen?” (Luke 21:7) and “...There will be powerful earthquakes, famines, and plagues from place to place; and awesome sights and mighty signs will come from the sky”(v.11). Perhaps one remembers that Jesus' opponents “to test him, asked him for a sign from heaven” (11:16). A little later Jesus responds to this request: “This generation is an evil generation; it seeks a sign, but no sign will be given it, except the sign of Jonah. Just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation.” (11:29-30)

But then, Jesus has always been a sign: “This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger” (2:12).

But then signs have been predicted by the prophets for centuries and thus are not simply marked to one moment of history. Luke Timothy Johnson (*Luke, Sacra Pagina*, 330) notes:

“The transition to this third part of the discourse is unobtrusive, marked mainly by the repetition of the term “sign” from 21:7 in 21:25. It quickly becomes clear, however, that the things now being described no longer concern the history of the believers or the fate of the city, but the worldwide experience of humans at the judgment: Luke speaks of the “distress and confusion among the nations” (v. 25), the things that are coming on “the inhabited world” (*oikoumene*, v. 26), on everyone inhabiting the earth” (v. 35). And if these indications were not clear enough, his description of “signs” are no longer those of wars and revolutions (v. 10) or even of earthquakes, famines, plagues and portents in the sky (v. 11) or armies around the city (v. 20), but entirely of cosmic events in sun, moon and stars (v. 25), the tumult of the ocean (v. 25), shaking of the heavenly powers themselves (v. 26).

All of this only echoes the prophet Isaiah (13:9-10), Ezekiel (32:7-8), and Joel (2:30-31). Thus, these heavenly signs do not just point forward to the coming, but also backwards as fulfillment of the prophets' word. Promise and fulfillment is one of the major themes throughout Luke. Just as Luke began with shepherds seeing the sign of a baby in a manger in fulfillment of the angels' message, so this future coming is certain to occur in fulfillment of the prophets' messages.

At that fulfillment Luke writes that people will be (a) in dismay, perplexed or (b) die of fright (could also be translated “faint”). These words are unique to Luke. But what is more significant is that there

are two groups of listeners: “the people/they” in vv.26,27 and “you” in v.28. The responses to what happens is quite different. The people faint (or die) from fear and foreboding, but you (the disciples implied) are to “*stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand.*” (v. 28) For “you” the terrible signs symbolize the redemption that has come near. What does it symbolize for the “people”?

“Redemption” -- this word (*apolytrosis*) occurs only here in all of the gospels. Although it occurs 7 times in Paul's letters and twice in Hebrews. A form of this word (*lytroomai*) occurs in Luke 24:21a: “But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” Another related word (*lytrosis*) is found occurs twice in Luke: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them” (1:68). “At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:38).

This word group carries the idea of releasing or freeing someone by the payment of a fee or ransom. This raises a number of questions. To what or whom are we in bondage? What is the payment that will be made that frees us? To whom is it paid? to Satan? to God? (Can God be bought off?) What will it mean to be set free? I think that in the context of this apocalyptic discourse, the coming of the Son of Man will free us from the terrible distress that has come upon the world.

As Brian Stofferger writes: “Although it might be reading more into this text than what is there, the Day of Judgment for the world is also a day of release from judgment for the believers. I've suggested that the Day of Judgment is a little like the old Fram oil filter commercials – ‘You can pay me now or pay me later.’ We can face divine judgment now: Confessing to God our sins, repenting of those sins, and having those sins wiped away by divine forgiveness. If all our wrongs have been removed by daily repentance and forgiveness; there will be nothing left to judge on the Judgment Day. We will be ‘pure and blameless’ on the day of Christ (Phil 1:10). The other option is to avoid daily judgments which cause us to face up to our sins and sinfulness and take our chances on facing God later -- when all people will be judged. That later judgment doesn't seem to be as pleasant as pre-judgment day confrontations with God, where, through Jesus, we have been promised that all our sins will be forgiven; where we will be justified -- a word that can be translated: ‘Declared not guilty.’”

A Final Admonishment

³⁴ “*Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life, and that day catch you by surprise*” ³⁵ *like a trap. For that day will assault everyone who lives on the face of the earth.* ³⁶ *Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son of Man.*”

After describing the days of the coming of the Son of Man, Jesus warns his followers that proper conduct is always expected – not just carousing and drunkenness (and such things) but even preoccupation with the anxieties represented by the “thorns” in the parable of the sower (8:14). These pressures of daily life lull people into false security. The exhortation to watch and pray foreshadows the same appeal during Jesus’ agony in the garden (22:46).

Luke composes an exhortation that emphasizes watchfulness and prayer and that warns against drunkenness and dissipation. The unit begins with a warning (v. 34) that is then related to the eschatological events that have just been forecast. Verse 35 supplies a rationale for the warning, and v. 36 offers both a general exhortation (“*Be vigilant*”) and a specific one (“*pray*”). Jesus has warned the disciples to be on their guard on three other occasions (12:1; 17:3; 20:46)

Verse 36 provides an apt conclusion for the eschatological discourse by enjoining the disciples to pray at all times so that they might have the strength to escape “all these things,” a phrase that evokes the

opening question of the discourse, “What will be the sign that this [lit. “these things”] is about to take place?” (21:7) and v. 12, “Before all this occurs...” By the end of the discourse, “all these things” includes the errors of the false prophets (vv. 8–11), the persecution and trials the disciples will experience (vv. 12–19), the terrors of the destruction of Jerusalem (vv. 20–24), and the cataclysm of the coming of the Son of Man (vv. 25–28). The only way to escape these events and be ready to stand before the Son of Man (cf. vv. 27, 36) is to be strengthened by constant prayer.

Sources

- R. Alan Culpepper, *Luke* in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995) pp. 398, 409-10
- Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, vol 3 of *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* ed. Gordon Fee (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997) 738-43
- Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, vol. 3 of *Sacra Pagina*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991)
- Jerome Kodell, “Luke” in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, eds. Diane Bergant and Robert J. Karris (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1989) 793-795
- Leon Morris, *Luke: An introduction and commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries Vol. 3: (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988)
- G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007)
- Brian Stoffregen, CrossMarks Christian Resources, available at www.crossmarks.com/brian/

Dictionaries

- Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995)
- Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990)

Scripture – Scripture quotes from *New American Bible* by Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC.