

In the Midst

Luke 21:5-19 & Malachi 4:1-2a

November 17, 2019

First Presbyterian Church, Luling

I cannot tell you the number of times every day that I get interrupted. An example from just this week. I bought some material to sew a shirt almost two months ago. In fairness, I have already made one shirt from that same shopping trip, but this piece has laid on my sewing table (otherwise known as the dining room table) for almost a month since I finished that first shirt. On Wednesday, I decided I would have time to cut out the pieces for the shirt. Well, the pattern is from a different pattern company than I usually use, and their instructions were lacking, and then the material had some weird spots on it that I was trying to work around, so it took me longer than it should have.

I was halfway through cutting the pieces out at 2:00, when the phone rang. It was a reminder that I had a video call, scheduled. Oh yes. The video call took less than 15 minutes, but then I spent another 30 trying to get my headset microphone to work, which it still won't. Then it was only 15 minutes until I had to leave to pick up the girls from school, so I didn't want to get all involved in the sewing project again.

I picked up the kids, then we had snacks and did homework, then walked the dog before it got dark, then it was time to fix us some supper, then cleanup supper, then coerce the kids into the shower and pajamas. At 8:00, I said to Andy, "I'm going to finish cutting out this shirt, which I started doing six hours ago."

And that's normal. I get interrupted by any number of things: kids, Daisy the dog, phone calls, emails, text messages, seeing something that needs doing in the house, doorbells, washing machines, dryers. It's become so normal for me that I interrupt myself, frequently, switching tasks back and forth because I'm not accustomed to any decent length of time to do any one thing. But I still don't like it.

And yet. In the midst of the interruptions, in the midst of what seems like chaos, in the midst of what often *is* chaos, there are moments of joy and grace. One of the girls has the habit of busting into the chicken dance at random moments, which never fails to make me laugh. The other thanks me for small things that I am barely aware of doing: making breakfast, bringing her umbrella to school when it's raining at pickup time, combing her hair. A "thank you Mommy" goes a long way toward offsetting an interruption.

This passage from Luke, as well as the passage from Malachi, seem like an interruption to the gospel story. It doesn't seem like good news. It doesn't give us a teaching of Jesus, it doesn't tell us of one of his miracles, it doesn't seem to fit in to what we think the story of Jesus is about. Despite our trouble with understanding the parables the past several weeks, I think we can say that this passage is even harder to understand than they are. What in the world is Jesus saying, what is he talking about, and why?

Similar passages appear in Matthew and Mark, predictions of destruction of the Temple and the people of Israel, predictions of the end of the world and the coming of the Son of Man. I will admit to you that I have never ever, in nineteen-and-a-half years of ordained ministry, ever preached on one of these passages—not Matthew, nor Mark, nor Luke, nor other places in the Bible where these kinds of passages appear. The lectionary puts them on the schedule regularly, once a year, and I have always decided to preach about something else. But this year, I decided, for some reason, to tackle it.

First, let's talk about what this passage is not. It is not a roadmap, a schedule, or a guide for us to predict the end of the world. Sure, we recognize some of the things Jesus is talking about: wars and insurrections, earthquakes and famines and plagues, nation rising against nation. That all sounds as familiar to us as it did to the people listening to Jesus. That doesn't mean we need to search the newspaper and decide that the end of the world is near, or far, or any other particular point in time. Over and over, throughout the gospels, in various ways, Jesus tells us that we don't know, that we can't know, the day or the hour. That even if we think we know, think we have it figured out, we don't. His words here don't contradict that.

The disciples and Jesus are in Jerusalem, at the Temple. It was magnificent, fantastic, the most beautiful building any of them ever had seen, ever would see. Truly a wonder of the world. They, and all Jews, counted on the Temple to be the concrete sign of God's presence in their midst, almost a guarantee that God was with them, a confirmation that God keeps the promises made to the people of Israel. The Temple had been destroyed and desecrated before, the people had been in exile from the land God had promised them, and they had learned different ways to trust in God's presence with them. But here was the Temple, and it was sure easy to take it as a sign of God's promise and God's blessing. They had come to depend on it.

What the disciples didn't know, but what the author of Luke did know, and what the first readers of Luke knew, was that the Temple would be destroyed

again, in the year 70. Luke wasn't written until around the year 85. Jesus may very well have predicted its destruction, but Luke is writing from a place of knowing exactly what happened and how horrible it was and continued to be, to have the foundations of faith destroyed.

It doesn't take much of a stretch to imagine how they felt when the Temple was destroyed. Think how we would feel, especially those of us who have been here our whole lives, if this sanctuary was destroyed by a fire or a tornado or something. Their despair was greater though, because they had a much stronger belief that the Temple was the only place where God could be worshipped rightly, the place where God lived, the place that ensured God's presence. We don't share that same belief, so their devastation would have been stronger than we can imagine for ourselves.

It takes even less of a stretch to imagine how they felt when Jesus essentially tells them that things aren't going to get any better; in fact, it's going to be worse. It will feel like the whole world is out of control, that things both made by humans and nature will go haywire, that all the people and things you thought you could count on will let you down spectacularly. We certainly have days like this, when nothing is going right for us or anyone else in our orbit, when the world seems to be falling apart faster than we can keep up with it, when the news is full of gloom and despair. And not just the parts of the world and news that affect us directly, the badness is spread far and wide.

In the midst of this, in the midst of things going the worst way possible, worse that you could have imagined, in the midst of chaos and corruption and sadness and death and despair, Jesus says this: you will have an opportunity to testify. And I will give you words and wisdom to do so. Quite the interruption.

Jesus has confidence in the disciples, in us, that we will keep the faith even in the worst of circumstances, and we will have an opportunity to say so, to testify, to witness to what keeps us strong and hopeful. In the midst of chaotic horror, Jesus gives us the strength to stand strong, to testify to his strength and not our own, to hold on to him rather than those other things and people that we thought were steady and dependable but have turned out not to be.

The prophet Malachi takes a similar turn. If anything, Malachi's picture of doom and gloom is even dooier and glooier than what appears in Luke. Everything will burn up, and there will not even be a branch or a root remaining to sprout in a more favorable season. It's a desolate image.

In the midst of that prophecy, Malachi interrupts himself with another image, well really two or three images: to those who revere God, a sun of

righteousness will rise, with healing in its wings. A new day will come, with righteousness and healing and even joy, because the next image is calves being turned out of their stalls, frolicking and jumping. And that's why we're singing "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," because hidden down in verse three is this very same phrasing from Malachi: "Hail the heaven-born prince of peace, hail the sun of righteousness. Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings."

Obviously Charles Wesley, who wrote those words, identified Malachi's sun of righteousness with Jesus, though Malachi himself might not have. But Malachi, in the midst of dire prophecies about the people's unfaithfulness and coming destruction, had this hope, of a new day, a healing day. Malachi is the last book in our Christian Old Testament, and this is almost the last verse. It ends on a note of...let's call it realistic hope, or hope tempered with realism: in the midst of chaos and heartache, hope interrupts, with a vision of a sun rising on righteousness and healing.

And Jesus says much the same thing: in the midst of the most important things crumbling and destroying themselves, in the midst of despair and sadness and heartbreak and betrayal and destruction and devastation, Jesus interrupts himself with confidence that we will remain faithful to that rising sun that Malachi describes, that we will have an opportunity to testify as to why we have remained faithful. And that we aren't to worry about what that testimony will sound like, because it will come from him. We will testify to that heaven born prince of peace, our sun of righteousness who has risen with healing in his wings. We will keep faith in him, and he keeps faith in us, and we hope and trust in a new day.