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The Gospel of Luke
LXXII. Unafraid, Hopeful, and Prepared
Luke 21:5-38

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It started out with what was probably just a casual observation about the beauty of the Temple. Something perfectly in-line with the opening verse of Psalm 84: “*How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!*”¹ But, in response, Jesus says something which had to have been absolutely shocking to those who heard it: “*As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.*” This beautiful Temple, says Jesus, will soon be destroyed. And from there, Jesus launches into an apocalyptic sermon sounding more like the Book of Revelation than the gospel story we have been reading.

Now most of what Jesus says in this prophetic message actually came to pass to 70 A. D. Jerusalem rose up against Rome – and Rome responded by laying waste to the city and its inhabitants, including the destruction of the Temple. The famed Wailing Wall is all that still stood after the Romans were finished. And, indeed, it was a time of terror, death, arrest, persecution and everything else that Jesus lays out here.

But, as with all apocalyptic texts, it is easy to miss the forest for the trees here – to become so bogged down in the symbolic details and fantastic signs, that we miss the fact that the point Jesus is making here, to His disciples, is actually very simple. Amid all the apocalyptic rhetoric, what Jesus is basically telling His disciples is that when they see these things begin to come to pass, they are to be unafraid, they are to be lifted up by hope, and that they are to be prepared by living a life of obedient faith in Christ beforehand.

And the same message is proclaimed to us when Jesus looks out beyond the events of 70 A. D. and speaks of His Second Coming. Far beyond the events of 70 A. D., Jesus points to that great day when we will see “*the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.*” And what are we to do on that day? “*Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*” As we await the Second Coming of Jesus, we are to do the same as the disciples were to do as they awaited the fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy concerning the Temple destruction of 70 A. D. – we are to be unafraid; we are to be lifted up by hope; and we are to be prepared for His return by a life of obedient faith.

Sadly, Christian talk of the Second Coming of Jesus, in our day, is often used to incite fear, not faith. Lurid imaginings of the Rapture and what awaits those left behind. For that matter, all that “left behind” literature which was so popular a while back served to promote nothing but fear

about the Return of Jesus: Be afraid – be very, very afraid! Which is just one reason why those books were so theologically wrong. For the basic New Testament teaching about the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, and certainly as we find it here in our passage this morning, is the exact opposite of that. For Christians, the basic message of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is that we should not be afraid – certainly not of the Return of our Lord and Savior. But also, because of His Return, we should not let anything make us afraid even before He comes – because the Second Coming is Jesus’ assurance to us that He really is in control, that all things really will be brought round to good for those who love Him²:

*And they asked him, “Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?”
And he said, “See that you are not led astray . . . And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified . . .”*

And then, a little further on: *“But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives.”*

Don’t be afraid, now or then, says Jesus about His Return and about the times leading up to His Return. Don’t let the world, or events in the world, unsettle you or shake you. Don’t turn into Chicken-little, don’t join a doomsday cult. Because the Return of Jesus means that **He** is what the future holds. **He** is what awaits us at the end of things. **His Kingdom** is what is coming into this world. In fact, already He’s got the whole world in His hands – and He’s got us there too. Yes, the world can be a scary place, life can bring upon us a lot of frightening events. But Jesus is coming again, which means that everything is going to turn out just fine in the end – better than fine. Jesus is coming again, which means that all the bad stuff which is trying to frighten us today has absolutely no chance of triumphing over us – the victory already belongs to Jesus because of His Cross and His Resurrection. Jesus is coming again, which means that nothing now or in the past or in the future can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. So don’t be afraid, says Jesus. Be unafraid, as we wait for His Kingdom to come.

And the way we access and hold on to this “unafraid spirit” is simply by daily staying close to Jesus and to His Word. *“See that you are not led astray,”* He tells us. By which He means that we should never take our eyes off of Him, nor our hearts away from His Spirit and our minds away from His Word. Stay focused on Jesus and we will thereby stay unafraid before the world. Gardner Taylor, long-time pastor of the Concord Baptist Church of Christ in Brooklyn, and one of the great preachers of the modern era, offers us a story, a parable of this. One day, he and his daughter – at that time still a young child – were visiting a great cathedral. All the lights in the cathedral were out, except for a single light shining on the altar at the far end of the aisle. It was very dark. *“As we stood back in the shadows,”* he writes . . .

*. . . this little girl edged closer to me and said, “I’m afraid.”
I said, “You need not be. This is God’s house. Let’s walk forward.”
As we came toward the lighted altar, this little girl said, “I’m not so afraid now as we get closer.”³*

This is God's world, and the victory shall be His. And the closer we daily draw to that truth, and the nearer we daily draw to the light of our Savior, and the more deeply we daily pull His Word into our hearts and into our heads, the less we shall be afraid. The more we will comprehend that because He is coming again, we have nothing to fear, whether things present or things to come. God is in control, says the Second Coming – despite any and all evidence the world, or life itself, may stir up against us. In the end, Jesus wins.

And not just be unafraid, says Jesus, but also be filled with hope. His Return means for us not just avoiding the crushing weight of fear, it also means daily being lifted up by His gift to us of a hope that will not disappoint us. *“Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”* And then again, in His brief parable of the fig tree, and all trees: *“As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near.”* Winter may be bleak and hard, but when we see those first green buds of spring, our hearts race ahead to the joy of summer warmth and vacation. The world may be bleak now, life may be difficult now, today may have more cares than we care to count. But Jesus is coming again. And already, in every corner of this world, can be seen the green buds of His mercy, love, and redeeming power. And winter will yield to summer. And this fallen world will yield to the glorious Kingdom of God. So, says Jesus, straighten out your stooped over backs, start standing tall right now – and get your chin off your chest and your eyes off the ground and start looking around you at the early signs of that which is to come. Indeed, live now in hope toward that vision of what is to come – don't live in despair towards all those things that are even now beginning to pass away. Live in hope, says Jesus.

One of my favorite contemporary poets is Wendell Berry – and in one of his poems, he really captures this attitude of glorious, defiant hope. He writes this: *“Expect the end of the world. Laugh. Laughter is immeasurable.”* And then this line – this beautiful, defiant, hope-filled line: *“Be joyful though you have considered all the facts.”*⁴ Be joyful – not because life might be smiling upon you in this moment. No, says Berry, consider all the facts, including all those things which do not bring a smile. All those bad, sad, and evil things about life in this world which can readily be seen or heard or read in the morning headlines. But then be joyful anyway. Be hopeful anyway: because we know that Jesus has defeated all the bad, sad, and evil things for us by His death on the Cross. And because we know the fact of what happened on Easter Sunday, how Jesus Christ rose up from that grave of bad, sad, and evil things to bring to us the gifts of His victory – that promise of new life, eternal life, the triumph of all that is good over all that is bad. Enabling us to do this immeasurable thing – to set despair aside, and to live instead by hope. To live by joy, and not by sorrow.

What does this look like? John Buchanan, a Canadian pastor and professor and author of some wonderful books on the Christian life, tells of a woman he knew named Helen. Helen was a Russian immigrant whose Christian family perished in one of Stalin's concentration camps. She escaped into Germany, just a girl, and found herself conscripted into forced labor under Hitler. She came to Canada after the war and was sexually assaulted by her cousin, the man who had promised her and the government that he would take care of her. Helen's life has been filled to the brim with that which is bad, sad, and evil. But listen to what Buchanan then writes about her:

Helen's life has been a graveyard of loss, a scrap yard of betrayal. But ask her any day what she knows, and she'll tell you, "God is good. He loves me." Her conviction about that hasn't come by toting up her days of wounds and wars, weighing them against her days of laughter and bounty, and seeing which tips the scale. Her belief has a different taproot: God is simply who He says He is, regardless of what her troubles might have tempted her to think or surmise. [Helen] is part of that great cloud of witnesses who, living by faith, refuse to reduce God to their own experience, to limit His love by the evidence of their own circumstances.⁵

To live by hope, in other words. To live by that hope born of the fact that because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, His victory over all that is bad, sad, and evil shall on that coming day be ours as well, and ours forevermore. To consider all the facts, as Berry puts it, as Helen's testimony puts it, is to live out of the great truth that Jesus Christ is even now already making all things new. And that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God. And that, in the end, Jesus wins. To know that these things are true is to live by a hope that will sustain us in all things, good or bad, until He returns.

And then, last, Jesus tells the disciples waiting for the destruction of the Temple and us waiting for the reconstruction and the redemption of all things in His Return – He tells us, while we wait for that day, that we are to use the time to become prepared. To become prepared – so that when He returns He will find us ready to receive Him. And how are we to be prepared? By living now lives of faithful obedience to Him and to His call to be His disciples, formed by His Word:

But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap . . . But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.

Stay awake, says Jesus. Be prepared, says Jesus. So that we will be ready to stand before Him and to receive Him on that glad and glorious day.

Be prepared. Paul, writing to his young protégé Timothy, puts it like this: *"Train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come."*⁶ Which makes me think, first of all, on just how much time to devote to our bodies, compared to how little time we invest in our souls – in our walk with Jesus. And which also makes me think of a story that Presbyterian preacher and professor Tom Long tells about when his son was running cross-country in high school:

My [son] was a star cross-country runner in high school. He belonged to the cross-country team with the same zeal a devout Episcopalian might feel toward the local parish. What is more, his cross-country involvement entailed a whole set of beliefs – doctrines

really – about nutrition, exercise, and aerobics. He believed, for example, that fueling up on carbohydrates the night before a race gives extra energy and that cool-down periods after a meet are important to avoid injury. But belonging to the team and having certain convictions did not make him a runner. It was the disciplines of running. Along with the others on the team, he pursued an extraordinary way of life. He met other runners many mornings at dawn to run several miles. He ate a special diet, refused to drink sugary sodas, and went to bed early before meets. He learned this way of life from his coach and from his older teammates, and he made it his own. The team picture in the high school yearbook merely shows that he was on the team. Getting up at 5:30 A.M. to run seven miles with his teammates is what made him a runner.

Similarly, Christianity is a way of life, a set of practices. These practices grow out of and embody our beliefs, and they are done with other Christians.⁷

Be ready for me when I come, says Jesus. Be prepared.

But all that talk of discipline and training and practice may well be hiding from us the best part of living for Christ now – which is the joy hiding just behind the hard work. The joy which comes out of living for Christ, in Christ, through Christ now. The joy which is the expected byproduct of simply seeking “*to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God*”⁸ in this present moment. Joy is the great secret of the disciplined, obedient, hopeful and unafraid Christian life.

This is from Frederick Buechner, one of my favorite Christian authors. Listen to how he describes the life of Christian service:

I think the kind of joy that brings tears to our eyes has much to do with what Jesus means by feeding each other. There are people who are literally starving for want of food, and there are other people, closer to home, who may be starving for want of nothing so much as whatever we ourselves can give them in the way of God only knows what small but life-restoring act of kindness and understanding. Literally or figuratively, for you and me to feed each other, to tend to each other's needs, one way or another to take care of each other is more and more to become part of that dance of earth and sky and men and women and water and beasts that according to the Psalmist makes the floods clap their hands and the hills sing together for joy.⁹

Joy is the gift given now to the Christian prepared now for when Jesus shall come again.

And that day is coming, says Jesus – that “great day in the morning,” as my Uncle Herbie always used to say. Therefore, says Jesus, be unafraid, be lifted up by hope, and be prepared for that day when our joy shall at last be made complete.

¹ Psalm 84:1.

² Romans 8:28.

³ Edward L. Taylor, ed., The Words of Gardner Taylor, Vol. 1 (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1999), p. 38.

⁴ Quoted in Thomas W. Currie, “The Luxury of False Religion,” in the Foundation for Reformed Theology e-newsletter dated May 28, 2023.

⁵ Mark Buchanan, The Holy Wild (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishing, 2003), pp. 78-79.

⁶ I Timothy 4:7-8.

⁷ Tom Long, Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), pp. 36-37.

⁸ Micah 6:8.

⁹ Frederick Buechner, The Longing for Home (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 131.