

“Global Events”

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New Testament Lesson: Jeremiah 33:14-16

Old Testament Lesson: Luke 21:25-36

On Tuesday, the ISIS terrorists who attacked Paris said they had plans for us, too, warning of an attack on Washington, DC. On Wednesday, New York City was added to the list. How do we respond to such a thing? Do we ignore it, trusting law enforcement and the military to handle things? Do we get scared and let fear and anxiety take over, which is what the terrorists want? Do we stay glued to the news cycle, watching reports and listening to the radio day in and day out?

The truth is, we do a little of each of these things, or sometimes, a lot. There is a balance to be struck in responding to such events in today's world. While there's no use in getting overly anxious, that does not mean we ignore what's happening.

There are signs that things are heating up, and a little fear and anxiety is normal. But it has to be balanced with an even stronger sense of faith and trust. How do we ensure that our faith is strong enough? Who do we trust to make everything come out OK in the end? Such questions of global peace are nothing new, nor is having them striking a little too close to home.

The people living in the time of Jesus had the same questions. They were living within the Roman Empire, surrounded by an occupation force that could do whatever it wanted – set taxes to the point of financial ruin, arrest and execute anyone who spoke out, and strike terror in the hearts of the people.

So they were constantly looking for their savior, the one who would rise up over and against the world as it was. It is out of that geopolitical landscape that Jesus emerges, to strengthen their faith and deepen their trust. This was his priority – keep the faith and trust in the Lord.

The world of first century Palestine was out of control, to some extent. The world of today is out of control, to some extent – out of control to the extent that we are out of touch with our faith, with our calling as children of God. That is what the coming season of Advent is all about – getting in touch with our faith and the promises it brings.

Advent is all about waiting for the birth of Jesus anew in our hearts, and anticipating the return of Jesus in the fullness of time, when all things will be set right again, here on earth as they are in heaven.

How do we, as Christians, go about waiting – waiting for Jesus to renew our faith when things get out of control and waiting for a time when the fullness of Christ will be known from one corner of the globe to another – a lasting peace the world over?

Jesus tells us how to do this – how to grow in the faith even amid unsettlingly events. Whether you are concerned about global crises like the war on terrorism or more personal struggles like losing a family member, fighting illness and disease, or struggling financially- no matter what you're concerned about, there is an opportunity to grow in the faith in the midst of all these life struggles.

The first thing Jesus tells us is that unsettling events in life are normal. There will be times when things seem to be out of control. "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars," says Jesus, "and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves."

By pointing to the sun, the moon and the stars, Jesus is saying that humanity's power to control and manipulate world events is limited. Trying to control and manipulate global events is like trying to quiet a roaring sea, or stop the waves from crashing in.

That's not to say that we can't or don't have an effect on global events. Clearly we do. It's just that the ultimate solution is not so much us trying to fix things around the world as it is us fixing things within our heart of hearts. That's the place to start in discovering and enjoying a deep and lasting peace, in our own hearts.

At the center of Jesus' teaching about living amid uncontrollable events is the Parable of the Fig Tree. "Look at the fig tree and all the trees," says Jesus. "As soon as they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near."

The kingdom of God is like a fig tree. Through it, all that we truly need is provided. It gives us figs (or food, sustenance for daily living). It sprouts leaves, which are a sign of new life. And this, says Jesus, means "that summer is ... near," that the light and warmth of a new season is upon us. Even though things seem to be getting worse, it does not mean that things can't get better. And in fact, with Christ, they always do. Through our faith in Jesus Christ, we have the assurance that there is always something better awaiting us.

And this is no more true than during the season of Advent. Despite any trouble we face, we continue to celebrate Christ in the world. We continue to prepare our homes for Christmas and our hearts for the joy that Jesus brings. "Be on guard," says Jesus, "so that your hearts are not weighed down with ... the worries of this life, and (so) that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap."

When Jesus talks about “that day,” many people believe he is talking about the day of final judgment, people like the sales clerk in the following story by Tim Redden.

“May I help you?” the clerk asked cheerfully, as Megan browsed through the children’s book section of the Christian bookstore.

“I’m looking for something for my 3-year-old,” the young mother said. “She loves books, and I want to get her something with a ‘Christian message.’” “I have exactly what you’re looking for,” the sales lady replied with a wink. It just came in; we’re really excited about it.... It’s the latest from Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Left Behind: The Toddler Edition*.” “Be on guard,” says Jesus, “... so that day does not catch you unexpectedly.”

When Jesus says, “Be on guard ... so that day does not catch you unexpectedly,” he’s not just talking about his return in the fullness of time. He’s talking about any day you find yourself gripped by fear – fear because of finances, or loss, or threat of terrorism. “People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world...,” says Jesus, but not you – not us. As Christians, Jesus calls us to, quote, “Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.” In other words, rather than allow ourselves to be gripped by fear and disappear, we can go about the day tuned into the joy and assurance that Jesus brings to this earth. That’s what we watch for and listen for the joy and assurances of Christ, even as we pray for peace, peace in our hearts and throughout the world.

Last Tuesday, a ministry colleague of mine named Leah Ntuala found her son, Mason, begging her not to go to France. She had no intentions of going to France, but he had heard news about the bombings in Paris. “We talked about it a little,” said Leah. “I asked him to pray with me. We prayed together for those hurt and killed in so many places around the globe, as well as for those who did the killing.” Mason asked her why they were praying for those who did the killing. Leah said, “Because they must be living in a very dark place in their lives to hurt people like that, and we want to make sure there is light coming in.” This all took place before 7 a.m., noted Leah, adding, “It was not the conversation I ever expected to have with my 6-year-old child. After we finished talking,” she said, “I wanted nothing more than to curl up on my mom’s lap.”

Despair or faith? Jesus tells us to pray in the face of troubling events, pray for the strength, quote, “to escape all these things that will take place, to not be consumed by them, and instead to stand in faith before the Son of Man.” When we stand in the assurance of our faith, we can claim the hope, peace, joy and love of Christ, in our lives and in our world.

Just as surely as Jesus came to us as a babe in the manger, Jesus is ready to come to us anew in our heart of hearts. Just as surely as Jesus will come again to set all things right, so Jesus holds all things in his power and his glory and his righteousness.

There is certain to be trouble in this world and throughout our lives. But even more certain is that Jesus is with us through all of it, and that Jesus has it all in hand, or as he says in John 16 "In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart; I have overcome the world. And to that, all God's people said: Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Spirit of unity, reconcile the people of this earth and show us the way of peace. Give us the wisdom to hold to what we need to be your church in these unsettling times.

Give us the grace to lay down those things that you can do without. Give us a vision of your breadth and length and height which overcomes the troubles of this world.

Give us a measure of your compassion, and provision, and mercy, which comforts us in times of trouble, provides for us in times of need, and saves us in time of trouble.

Yes, Holy Spirit, renew us and give us peace, a peace given to us moment by moment through your Son Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we
forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever.
Amen.**