

"A View Between Fingers"

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 33
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

10:45 a.m. Sunday, November 14, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Malachi 4:1-2a; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

When my family members are busy watching various crime dramas on television (*NCIS*, *Criminal Minds*, *CSI*, and so on), my habit is to remain out of the room for the first 15-20 minutes. **Then** I enter and plop down in front of the TV with my family. Allowing that amount of time to elapse before I enter the room pretty much guarantees I will miss the brutal murder, the scariest part. I do get a little scared watching those things. But the rest of the show is often fascinating as they solve the crime, and I like to view that. Now, say 5 minutes into the show, should a family member say to me, "It's safe to come and watch now," I don't think I'd believe them. I'd like to believe them, only I'm not that naïve. I know if I sit in my Lazy-boy at 9:05, well, soon I'll be viewing the show between my fingers, scared out of my wits.

In reading today's Gospel—Luke's account of Jesus and his disciples walking near the Temple in Jerusalem—and hearing Jesus say to the disciples in the middle of verse 9: "Do not be terrified...", it appears Jesus is saying this only 5 minutes into the show! Because Jesus then goes on to describe terrible calamities and dangerous situations even for the disciples themselves. By the end of the 12th verse, I figure the disciples are now looking at Jesus between their fingers, scared out of their wits at what Jesus is describing.

It all began when they made a seemingly innocuous remark about the Temple, this huge edifice to which Jews from near and far made pilgrimage. The Temple was a massive structure continuously being refurbished and renovated, monies poured into it for various embellishments. In fact, during the time of the earthly Jesus, King Herod had a building program that nearly doubled the size of the Temple Mount. The disciples, these country bumpkins, come to the big city and stand, gaping open-mouthed, in awe of it. The Temple was quite possibly the most impressive sight they'd ever seen. Think Hoover Dam in Nevada—another massive, man-made structure that looks solid and permanent—and you get an idea of what the disciples were thinking as they gazed at the Temple in Jerusalem.

Jesus gives them a healthy dose of reality: *The days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.* In shock and bewilderment, they ask, "When? What signs will there be that this would take place?" They thought it would have to be the end of the world for this magnificent building to suffer such destruction.

To which Jesus replies that, no, it won't be the end of the world. And don't believe those who claim to know when the end will be, because they don't know. Just

know this, says Jesus—that long before the end, this Temple will be thrown down, and many, many other things will happen. Challenging, distressing, scary things. Wars, earthquakes and famine, disasters and persecutions.

Yet immediately before Jesus details those other things, he says, “Do not be terrified.” Right. Easy for him to say. But we **do** get scared. 2000 years later, we reel from war’s devastation. World War I, the war to end all wars, is barely a memory, and we’re mired in this current war, and our honorable servicemen and women are dying. Natural disasters wreak havoc, as earthquakes level towns, famines lead to starvation, floods bring desperation. Terrorism only stokes the fear burgeoning in our hearts, and people of every faith have known persecution for their beliefs at the hateful hands of others. We’re looking at life through our fingers some days, scared.

And the things that once felt secure...our massive financial institutions, our homeland security, our can-do American resourcefulness to tackle any challenge—those things don’t seem so solid now. We can’t count on them now. No one can guarantee they won’t fall apart.

Maybe some of us **do** think the end of the world is coming soon. Maybe some of us figure the Incas were right, and we’re racing headlong toward 2012.

So we can probably understand the disciples’ fear. Look, they were bewildered, scared, feeling utterly helpless and dwarfed by events much larger than themselves. And fear can be paralyzing. Fear can make us want to bail out, escape. There might be some fight in us, but sometimes its **flight** that takes over.

In the span of a couple weeks, the mid-state has seen two young people take their own lives. The one suicide has received public exposure at the family’s request, because the young man was taunted and bullied, and apparently there had been, as the newspaper article put it, some humiliating experience in the school cafeteria earlier in the week. This story comes on the heels of the recent suicide of a Rutgers University student, whose cruel roommate secretly used a webcam to post the young man’s romantic encounter with another man on the Internet for anyone to see. I can’t help but think these young folks who took their own lives considered the world crashing down on them already, the end near, so why not take flight, because they had no fight left in them, so bruised and battered were they.

And if it’s not suicide as a way of “checking out,” do you and I in our own fear, when we are overwhelmed by the world’s distress, find other means of “flight” to protect ourselves? Like me and those television crime shows...do we stay out of the room until we think it’s safe to enter? Do we go through life, simply viewing the world through our fingers?

Yet remember, Jesus clearly states here that the Temple’s destruction was not the end of the world. Wars, insurrections, and natural disasters would not mark the end of the world. Even the very personal tragedies the disciples would face—betrayal and persecution—were not the end. But they would happen. For Luke,

compiling and organizing these stories of the earthly Jesus into his Gospel, the Temple's being destroyed by the forces of the Roman Empire was a historical reality—70 AD. For Luke, the earliest generations of Christians were indeed enduring persecution. All of these things were happening. And yet the world had not come to an end. It was just a broken, sinful world. It still is a broken, sinful world. Jesus told the disciples not to be afraid. But he didn't offer that as simple platitude. He gave reason for them not to be afraid because he told them not a hair on their head would perish, that their faithful endurance would save them. He didn't mean they might not suffer in this earthly life, but he did mean this suffering would not be their end. Can we understand today's scripture, and the historical events of 2000 years + as but a piece in the larger story of God and his purpose to transform what we are to what He would have us be as his creation? The "end of the world"—rather than being all cataclysm and destruction—is maybe instead completion and perfection. Not at all something to fear.

For this Jesus, this One encouraging his disciples, would himself face betrayal and persecution and a world crashing down on him, would endure suffering on the cross unto death. But it also would not be the end. Luke could confidently repeat Jesus' words because he knew about Jesus' resurrection. As New Testament professor Audrey West noted, temple stones dashed to the ground marked an end of sorts, but the stone rolled away from the tomb marked a beginning.

And because of that beginning, you and I do not need to view the world's events through our fingers, or wait until it's "safe" to enter. For at the middle of this laundry list of catastrophes, disasters and persecutions that Jesus has enumerated, he says to his followers: *This will give you an opportunity to testify.*

Don't look at that word as if it only refers to testimony in a trial. Jesus says that in the midst of this broken, sinful world you and I will have opportunity to witness to God's continued good activity in the world. We will have opportunity to act in ways that speak Christ's resurrection power and offer a new beginning to those who fear the world is crashing down on them. We will have opportunity to share our stories of God's grace in our own lives, set in the context of the larger story of God's grace, and help others come to know God's loving presence in their lives.

But the opportunity can only be taken up when we are fully engaged in this world. It's not a matter of waiting till 9:20 to make certain the world's safe to enter. It's not a matter of looking through our fingers. The opportunity to bear witness to God's life-giving ways will take place in the midst of troubles and pain and challenges and tragedy, where Jesus promises a power and a wisdom to enable us to testify.

Last Sunday there was a story in the Patriot-News about the wife of a U.S. soldier stationed in Afghanistan. Emily Franks oversees a support group for wives and families of Gator Company, the name of the 120-man infantry company. Emily's role in the Family Readiness Group is to nurture a sense of community among the families who live at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, so they can help one another through everything—financial struggle, loneliness, fear, grief. For Emily, that means being

willing to enter the pain of another person, while struggling not to be overcome by her own real, daily fears for her husband's safety. Emily organizes dinners with other wives, visits families, e-mails caring messages, and makes constant phone calls. Now, the Internet and its multiple instant-communication feeds means these women often hear of casualties among their husbands' company but won't yet know if their spouse was hurt. So Emily has the task—a difficult one—of calling spouses and parents to let them know that their loved one is safe, but that fellow soldiers in the company died. She reads to them the official list of those in the company who were killed. She will have many, many phone calls to make, and people will want to talk, and so Emily listens for hours. She is the sounding board for their fear and grief and pain. Her mother once suggested Emily move back in with her until Emily's husband returns from Afghanistan. Emily refused, unwilling to leave the other military wives. Emily is Christian, and while her activities and her words may not be expressly religious in nature, it is clear she is testifying, bearing witness to God in her loving, healing way. And it is equally clear God has given her words and a wisdom to do this.

I end with just a bit of free verse from Pastor Dan Bollerud:

*In the name of Christ we will all be remembered
Not because of our greatness or the size of the stones
Or the magnificence of the building left as an edifice
But because the little we have done was in the name of Christ.
When all the world comes crashing down on all sides
Even then they will know what we did was in the name of Christ...
When all others fall away and we stay in love
They will know what we did was in the name of Christ..*

Keep testifying. **AMEN.**