

Matthew 24:14–30

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

Taught for the Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost, Year A (Revised Common Lectionary) ·
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This is your friendly teacher, or lecturer, or pastor, or whatever you want to call me. I'm back in Minnesota for just a couple of days. Tomorrow I'm going down to New Ulm to give the annual lectures, on the effervescence of sanctification, so we'll see if the bubbles form a good foam down there. I flew in yesterday, I go back to Oregon on Thursday, and we'll be back at the end of the month. I have to tell you that to orient myself, because, as you know, it sometimes happens that I don't know where I am.

We've come late into the season after Pentecost, heading toward Advent, with just a few Sundays left. This used to be the tail end of the Trinity season, working into Trinity 25, 26, and 27, way out in the outer reaches. Now it's the Sundays after Pentecost, unnumbered so as not to cause too much confusion among the liturgically aware, I suppose. At any rate, the texts are pretty much the same.

Threat and Sunny Breaks

When we get to this time of year, like the weather in the Midwest, things start to turn apocalyptic, and that's exactly what's happening in the texts assigned for this Sunday. There is such an overwhelming sense of threat in them that you could wonder whether there's any hope left. Everything has turned, and the end of the world is upon us, complete with warnings.

So there is a pattern in these texts, as in apocalyptic texts generally. The pattern emphasizes the threat dramatically: the imminence, the dawning, the bearing down, the breaking in, the eruption, like a thief in the night. And at the same time, in the midst of all this drama, it speaks a word of hope. The grounding context, the driving force in these texts, is the conviction Paul expresses in 1 Corinthians 15: "As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order."

With Adam and Eve, with their turning, there was introduced a defining distortion, a deceit, a destruction, a devolution, a falling away, in which everything has been moved under the power of death. So sin, death, and the devil, the current rulers of this evil age, have broken loose, and their power has permeated virtually everything. It is God's creation, to be sure, and evidence of that can be seen in the hope that remains. But at the same time everything is now in bondage to decay, and because of that comes the end. The end times are not a time of progress, evolution, joy, or discovery. They are the time when these powers meet their Waterloo. They're going down. And as they go down, everything goes down with them, because they have come to permeate and grip the shape of things in this age so thoroughly. Their destruction is apocalyptic, an overwhelming catastrophe, and so there is threat brooding right through all of this.

Some years ago Alvin Rogness, whom many of you remember as president of Luther Seminary before things started their devolution, wrote a wonderful book called *Signs of Hope in the Thunder of Spring*. We might also steal a phrase from the Canadian weather forecasters: sunny breaks. In all the storming and fury and apocalyptic of a storm bearing down on the prairies, there is a sunny break, an eruption of a little hope, the beginning of something different. Each of these texts has this character. They drive home the apocalyptic, but to one extent or another you also find in each of them the hope that is given. The task of the preacher working with these texts is to honor both: to honor the reality of the impending destruction of things, since you can't watch the news without a sense that things are breaking down around us, and at the same time, and particularly, to tend the hope that is breathing through these texts. They're rich and powerful, and by the time you get to the end there's a lot of apocalypse, but there's also a lot of hope.

As you know, I still work on the assumption that the Gospel text has priority Sunday by Sunday, and that the supporting texts give you instruction on how the Gospel is to be preached. So we'll work through the Old Testament text, the psalm, and the passage from 1 Thessalonians 5 first, and when we've done that we'll spend some good time on the Gospel.

Zephaniah: A Prophet Who Knows Whom He's Mad At

First, Zephaniah 1:7, 12–18. I don't like it, of course, when they start sewing verses together to support the views of the current liturgical saints, but I guess we have to take what we get. Verse 7: "Be silent before the Lord God!" That's not a bad introduction. "For the day of the Lord is at hand; the Lord has prepared a sacrifice, he has consecrated his guests. And on the

day of the Lord's sacrifice I will punish the officials and the king's sons and all who dress themselves in foreign attire."

This is typical apocalyptic. The apocalypticist, the author of the text, sees himself as powerless and cast to the side, and from that perspective he sees powers breaking loose over the top of things, powers released by God: the day of the Lord, when all things will be made right, when everything will be restored. And in this case the apocalypticist is a little ticked. He's pissed, we could say. And he knows pretty well whom he's irritated with.

Now, this is always dangerous for a preacher. If you're reading the text and you get mad at specific people in the congregation, you should probably go get yourself a malted beverage of one kind or another, maybe a malted milk, and cool it for a while. If you start seeing visions of particular people when you read a text, it's probably a warning that you'd better lay off until it becomes a little more all-inclusive. But he's mad, and you can tell. "On that day I will punish all who leap over the threshold, who fill their master's house with violence and fraud. On that day, says the Lord, a cry will be heard from the Fish Gate, a wail from the Second Quarter, a loud crash from the hills. The inhabitants of the Mortar wail, for all the traders have perished; all who weigh out silver are cut off." Go get them. He knows whom he's mad at, he knows on whom the judgment is coming down, and he is identifying them very carefully.

The Lord's anger is one thing; your own is something else. Honoring the Lord's anger is, of course, the preacher's job. These texts are sometimes full of the Lord's anger. But when it's the prophet who's ticked off, you'd better watch it, because anger is contagious. People smell it on you, and because they smell it on you they're likely to punish you for it and assume that somehow you're the cause of it. Of course this is ample warning. The day of the Lord is something to be feared, because it is judgment on the powers that have distorted and destroyed human life. But at the same time those powers might be a little more generic than the prophet's list of enemies.

Psalm 90: Our Dwelling Place

Psalm 90 has things more in balance. This is just a gorgeous psalm, and I'd be pretty tempted by it. I love to preach on the Psalms; they're so rich and so overwhelming and such a gift. Carolyn and I sit every morning and read a psalm together at breakfast, back and forth, as part of our devotions. It's just a joy, and after years and years of the Psalms we know what's coming. We groan a little when we get lost in Psalm 119, but still it's worth the trouble.

“Lord, you have been our dwelling place,” Psalm 90 begins. Here is a statement of confidence. Usually when we speak of a dwelling place, we speak of something fixed: a home where we can go. Some of us go home to the houses we grew up in, some to the towns we grew up in, some to places where we’ve lived for a long time. We go home, and it feels good. God has been our dwelling place. That is, God has been the one to whom we go, the one to whom we turn in the time of trouble, the one who has sheltered and protected us. So Psalm 90 begins with a wonderful confession of hope in the goodness of God, who becomes our dwelling place. Everything else about life moves; he stays in place. He is strong, even as he gives us a place, even as he moves out ahead of us. And so he gathers us in safety.

But now the apocalyptic breaks out, and when it breaks out, all hell breaks loose. Our dwelling place has turned on us in judgment. And the psalm moves from the macrocosmic to the microcosmic, from the whole of the heavens and the earth to us in particular, from the broadest range to the most personal. He has a word to speak against us. Still, even as our dwelling place erupts in judgment upon us, we can call out to him in prayer, confident that he will hear us. It’s a little like taking the hand of a raging parent, turning to face the anger, and saying, “You’re better than this.” That is faith itself, which falls on Christ Jesus in the midst of the storm and says, “Look, you can do a lot better than this. We know your anger, we appreciate it, but we’d like you to cool it for a bit, because this is getting a little wild.” Well, that’s the apocalyptic.

1 Thessalonians 5: Children of the Day

Now 1 Thessalonians 5. You could preach on this text all day and not run out. This is the kind of text you’d love to get in Africa, because there you have enough time. I remember sitting down after an hour once, and the congregation came and said, “Are you taking a break? We could use a little more.” Well, with this text you could do a little more.

Paul speaks first of all of “the times and the seasons.” There were questions in the early church about when Christ would return. They had expected him sooner, as you know, and now it’s later, and so there are disputes. And so we get this wonderful word: he will come like a thief in the night. You don’t know when it’s going to happen. “When they say, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman.” “But you, beloved, are not in darkness.”

One of my favorite memories of this text comes from when we lived in Northeast Minneapolis. A great old pastor lived kitty-corner across the block from us. He had been pastor there for thirty years; he had baptized babies, was marrying the children he had baptized, and pretty soon was baptizing their children. It was just incredible: an old Swedish parish, an old Augustana church, just fabulous. We couldn't join, of course, because it was LCA. But we went over there one stormy Sunday at this time of year when the assistant preached, and he preached on the thief-in-the-night text. He compared Christ Jesus to a python escaped from the city zoo, hiding in garages and attacking people out of nowhere: you'd better watch out, because he's coming after you. I was watching the old pastor while this travesty was going on. It was just terrible. I nudged Carolyn and said, "Just watch what happens in the closing prayer." Sure enough, he got up for the closing prayer, and the first words out of his mouth were, "We thank you, O Lord, that there is nothing serpentine about you, but that you have crushed the serpent's head beneath your heel; enfold us, not in terror, but in the arms of your blessing and love."

If that's not the apocalyptic, you never heard it. The terror is loose; that's correct. There's plenty of terror out there. If you don't think so, just take your pulse. You can find it. If you're a parish pastor, you're a lightning rod for it, and it's going to find you soon enough. But in the terror, in the midst of the disaster, Christ Jesus reveals his love and power.

So out of this Thessalonians text the gospel just starts to unfold like a torrent of love. "But you, beloved, are not in darkness. You are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not fall asleep as others do," others who are blind to the fact that Christ is returning in blessing to bring the final defeat of all these powers that have brought so much corruption and disappointment and simply the reign of death. He is coming to overpower them, to put them under his feet, and as he does so he is coming to make the creation what it was meant to be originally. What could be better than that? So there is destruction, the reality of the overcoming, but there is also the erupting sign of joy breaking loose in the promise. You are not children of the night. You are children of the day.

"Those who get drunk get drunk at night." Of course, that's when it easily happens. "But since we belong to the day, let us be sober." There's no time for that kind of business right now. Christ is coming, he is going to overturn these powers, and when he does, things are finally going to be right. "Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing." You hear the confidence in love. Think of the difference between this and some

reformers who start by condemning everybody: “You’re inactive, you just sit there, you never do anything; Lutheran congregations are dead.” Or the reverse: “We know Lutherans will be raised before other Christians, because it says the dead in Christ will rise first,” blah, blah, blah. Just stupidity. That’s the false gospel you don’t want anything to do with.

Here is the true gospel: you are children of the light. How about that? You’ve been baptized into him. Let others get drunk at night. There’s no time for that monkey business. You just get a hangover anyway and wake up with your mouth tasting like Tarzan’s loincloth, as one of my friends in college used to say. What good is that? But waking up to Christ Jesus, holy smokes, what could possibly be better than that? He’s going to come, he’s going to do it, and it’s going to be right. So we look forward to this not with dread, although of course there is some dread in it, but with eager longing, expectation, and hope. He knows the end of the story. One day he’s going to tell it. There will be an apocalyptic conflagration, all right, but in the end he will be standing, and you will be standing with him. So you can look forward to it.

The Gospel: The Desolating Sacrilege

The Gospel has this same character, and is it ever fun. The appointed text is Matthew 25:14–30. But I’ve got another text: I’m going to give you Matthew 24:14–30, which is the one I picked out, and you’ll have to live with me, because I haven’t gotten to Matthew 25 yet. So we’ll just take that.

Here is the desolating sacrilege spoken of in Mark 13, now taken over into Matthew 24. Once again the threat breaks out, and it breaks out with such power because the desolating sacrilege has already happened in the minds of these people. What is it? Generally it is considered to be the fall of the Jerusalem temple and its utter profanation by the Romans. They broke into the Holy of Holies, the most sacred place in all of Israel, an empty room where God was supposed to dwell. They broke in there and released a herd of hogs. It was as if one of those hog trucks had spilled its load right into the Holy of Holies, with pigs running loose, defecating all over everything, contaminating the holiest places of all. Everything sacred, everything you could possibly rely on, has been completely overturned.

And here it comes, beginning with verse 16. This is good news, by the way, that I’ve been telling you: you will see the desolating sacrilege, and everything will go to hell in a handbasket, and it will continue that way. So the urging here, the admonition, is to flee now. That’s quite interesting by itself, because a couple of weeks ago, on Reformation Day, we had

“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” and Psalm 46, “a very present help in trouble.” That is critically important, because God comes in the trouble. But here the text urges us to flee the trouble, and to show mercy and concern for those who are worn down: mothers nursing their babies, for instance, or those caught in winter who can’t get traction. So I suppose all of Minnesota, and North Dakota and South Dakota too, Iowa and Wisconsin, wherever winter breaks loose, is being prayed for here. “Pray that your flight may not be in winter,” because you don’t want to be slipping and sliding into oblivion.

So the urging is to flee, and particularly to be wary of a couple of distractions. One is false prophets. If you want to see what they look like, all you have to do is watch Sunday morning television. It’s just plain full of them, all with their wacky theories about how the world is going to end and their admonitions to give them plenty of money, so that they don’t have to rely on anybody but themselves. When the end does come, you’ll be able to see them a hundred miles off. Be wary of the false prophets. Beware of those who would distract you or take you away, because you’ve got to boogie. Get going and get out of here, because there’s nothing left but destruction.

It’s interesting how this text works through all the options and eliminates them. It is clear that the dawn of the end of the age is not a progressive development in which all things come to fruition. According to this text it is not an evolutionary scheme toward which everything is tending. It is more like a sudden and violent storm. It breaks loose in the midst of daily life and transforms it; it brings everything to a screeching halt.

For the Sake of the Elect

But now, in the midst of this bad news, this wholesale condemnation of things as they are, this approaching judgment in which everything will be destroyed, there is a little word that pops up a couple of times. The days will be cut short. For whom? “For the sake of the elect.” Now who are they? That’s the question.

To answer it we can go to Romans 8. The elect are those who have been called according to his purpose. They are those who have been justified. They are those who have been predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son. And who are they? They are you. You are the elect. And the purpose of this text is to get you up on your hind legs in front of your congregation to tell your people that God has in fact chosen them.

The temptation with that kind of preaching, of course, is to start looking for evidence: “They’ll know we are Christians by our love.” No. They’ll know we are Christians by our sins, and our willingness to confess them and be truthful about ourselves. That’s how they know we turn to Christ Jesus. And that calling has happened. It was a historical event, in which someone came and said, “You belong to Christ Jesus,” and it was the beginning for each of us. Usually that happens the first time in baptism. And it has been sustained at the table, where we have heard these words: “This is my body, given for you. This is my blood, poured out for you and for many for the remission of sins.” You’re one of them. He isn’t saying that to you just to titillate you or give you a little Sunday goose. He is saying it because he has chosen you. You are the elect, and because you are among the elect, even while things are going down around you, he will be sustaining you.

There’s the pattern: imminent, wholesale destruction, an eschatological finish in which everything permeated by the power of death is destroyed. And in the midst of that destruction, signs of hope in the thunder of spring, a sunny break, a great, great promise. You have been chosen by him, and whatever form the apocalyptic takes, he will preserve you.

One of my dear friends, a retired pastor out in Washington State who taught me an awful lot about being a pastor, likes to say it this way: “We don’t know when it’s going to come, and in fact we don’t necessarily know what is going to come, but we know who is coming.” And because we know who is coming, we know that the apocalyptic, as overwhelmingly threatening as it is, is also the beginning of the days when he will make all things new. That has already started in me, and now it is going to be brought to completion. We can’t give thanks enough for that. Good night, this is as good as it gets.

So we fear it, of course. We’re wise enough to do that. This is no joke; we’re not fooling here. The good Lord is ticked, and it’s going to cost us. But in the midst of that he is not unrelentingly terrible but unrelentingly good, pouring himself out for you in Christ Jesus.

There you go. Does that give you enough to prime the pump? You can play with this now. I think about you and pray for you as you get ready to preach. I’ve enjoyed this so much, and I like to think of you going into the pulpit carrying the gospel under your tongue, spilling it to everyone. God’s peace. Any questions or arguments?

Questions and Answers

A comment on preachers who exploit the terror of these texts.

Most of the time that's exactly how it goes, and it doesn't matter whether it's the conservatives or the liberals. Both sides are bound and determined to use that terror for their own benefit, to hook into it and use it to provoke some voluntaristic reaction, so that we'll give them whatever they dream of. You can't do that. That's just surrendering to the power of the human. The reality is that this is terrifying, and for good reason, because the world as we know it is not going to continue as we know it. But the reality is also that Christ is greater than the terror. As long as all you have to look at is yourself, if you have any rationality left, you're going to be terrified. Holy smokes.

We had a kind of drama in our congregation out in Oregon last Friday. A dear woman, just fabulous, stood up in the middle of Bible study, said she was sick and had to go, and she wound up in the hospital. I expect she won't live until we get back. Her name is Doris, and she always used to say, "You can remember me easily, because I'm old and homely and fat and ugly." So one day I met her in the Safeway store and said to her in front of the clerk, "You homely old thing, who let you in here?" The clerk just about fainted. She's a fabulous woman, full of faith in the gospel. The end is coming, personally and for our whole creation. Therefore we fear, and yet Christ is greater than our fear.

A comment that preachers tend to run from these apocalyptic texts.

That's exactly right. When we get these apocalyptic texts, I always think it gets windier because of all the preachers running from them. Of course, if all you have is the kind of biblical education being dispensed these days, in which you are the author of the text and in control of it, then when you get a text that says you're out of control, you have no alternative but to run. But Christ Jesus is in control, and so you can stand there. People know this anyway. They know these texts, they remember them, and they've heard them misused in a thousand different ways.

A comment on faith's fear of losing Christ.

This is faith's fear, and it's a fear I've often encountered in older people. Younger people can make themselves comfortable with the realities of unbelief. But the older you get in the gospel, the more difficult it becomes to understand that people would not accept it or believe it, and the greater the anxiety becomes that somehow we're going to lose it. One of the best sermons I ever read was Luther's sermon on the text where Mary and Joseph are looking for Jesus while he is talking with the teachers in the temple. Luther listens to the text from Mary's

perspective, and he has Mary think to herself, “It was bad enough that I had to be chosen to be the mother of the Christ, and now I’ve gone and lost him.” And then you hear him meditating on this. This is faith’s greatest fear: that we’ll lose him, that somehow we’ll lose our grip on him. And of course the joy of it is that his grip is on us.

A comment that the promise goes right to the bullseye of that anxiety.

That’s exactly right. Christ Jesus knows your name. He has your name inscribed on his hand; he is not going to forget you. And when he sees you, he isn’t going to say, “Remember that night in the pool hall in Baltic?” He is going to say, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” It will be pure promise and pure fulfillment. So in the midst of the terror comes the most reassuring, gracious promise. And then your job is very simple: you elect them. You say, “Christ has chosen you, and he is not going to abandon you.” Your name is inscribed on his hand. He’ll say, “Haven’t I seen you someplace before? Oh yes, when you were squalling and filling your diapers at your baptism. That was the first time.” When you see these things, the hope is arising, rising green, as Rogness liked to say, just breaking through.

A comment on the vultures: “Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.”

I think about that a lot. One of the great things about living in western Oregon is that there are raptors all over the place. We took a course on raptors so we could figure out what we were looking at, and both Carolyn and I have come to love them. We have vultures circling over our house fairly regularly, and you can tell from their wings that they’re vultures, cruising up there. They have incredible sight and the ugliest heads you ever saw in your life, just made for invading a dead body. They’re terrible-looking birds. But in flight they are utterly graceful fliers. And that is exactly what Jesus says. When you see vultures circling, you know what they’re doing: it’s time for lunch. McDonald’s is open, and there’s going to be meat on Friday, I’ll tell you. They’re going to poke those deep red heads right into the guts first, and they’ll be eating. Jesus knows this analogy well, and I can see him grinning. Where the body is, the vultures gather. Anybody who lives in our rural world knows how that works. The further west you go, the more you see magpies and vultures, lots of really interesting birds. What we love to see are the harriers. They fly about fifteen feet above the ground, cruising along powerfully, and then all of a sudden they drop, bang, down on something and up again.

A comment that Christ comes as the thief.

That's good. I love that. That's just fabulous. He is the thief. He's sizing up your burglar alarm right now, looking things over, watching your habits. He keeps a close eye on you, as on me and several of the rest of us here. He's got to watch us. He takes what is precious in order to redefine us and make us new people. He is going to steal sin, death, the devil, and God's curse; he takes what would destroy us and uses it to make us new. That's a lot of fun.

Well, my friends, next week I'll be back home in the great state of Oregon. Thanks a lot to each of you. My prayers go with you, and my confidence and delight. You've got something stirring here in the Word. It's about as good as it gets. All the best. We'll see you.

SOURCE

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Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvSWAO_SLPc

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