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Sermon for VU Chapel on 13 NOV 2016
Pentecost 26C—Luke 21:5-19

One of the most impactful books that I've read in recent years is Eric Cline's *1177 B.C.: The Year Civilization Collapsed*. Cline describes how, in a very brief time, the highly sophisticated and interconnected assemblage of civilizations in the eastern Mediterranean and Mesopotamia at the end of the Bronze Age collapsed. He argues that there was no single cause. Rather, it was a perfect storm of droughts and famines, earthquakes, invasions and migrations and revolts, and the breakdown of international trade. In a few short years, there were no more Minoan, Mycenaean, Trojan, Hittite, or Babylonian kingdoms, and Egypt—that most stable of all ancient empires—was weakened to the core. This was the time of whatever historical events lay behind Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and the time when a small group of tribes called "Israel" emerged in Palestine. Over a very few decades, that is, in the blink of an eye, it must have seemed then, a stable and prosperous world order disappeared into chaos.

Today's Gospel lesson takes us to an analogous time, at least in the experience of the first generation of Christians. The whole world didn't fall apart, but the Roman province of Judea certainly did. One day during what we now call Holy Week, Jesus and others were walking through the temple in Jerusalem, and some were admiring the construction and the adornments. Jesus observed to them that all too soon—within forty years, as it turned out—not one stone would remain upon another. That's what happened in the year 70 of our era, when the Romans crushed the First Jewish Revolt and burned the city and its temple to the ground. While they were at it, we are told, they crucified so many Jews that they ran out of wood for crosses.

Then Jesus says, in essence, you haven't heard the half of it. Disasters both natural and human will roil the world, and even they will not represent the end of the present age and the start of what the rabbis would call the *olam ha-ba'*, the age to come.

Then Jesus get personal. Even before these frightful signs, his own followers will be singled out for betrayal, arrest, trial, and punishment. It's not exactly the "prosperity gospel" preached by some in years since.

So what kind of gospel—what kind of good news—is there in Luke 21? Is this simply Jesus' version of Winston Churchill's famous line to the House of Commons in 1940: "All I have to offer is blood, toil, tears, and sweat"? Not exactly. First, he says, these tribulations will offer an opportunity for those who bear his name to bear witness. And when the moment comes to do so, they will not be left without resources: Jesus himself will provide words and wisdom, and his followers will be irrefutable.

That is not to say that the verdicts will go their way. Human judicial processes are always subject to corruption. Some will even be killed. But then, he concludes mysteriously: "But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives."

So how in the world does all of this affect Christians today? In at least three ways, it seems to me. First, there are places in the world where those who bear the name of Christ do indeed pay a price—sometimes the ultimate price—for their endurance. Parts of Africa and the Middle East come quickly to mind, but they are only the most notable and current examples. Those of us who do not face the literal horrors dare not fail to join Pope Francis and others in both prayer and advocacy for their sakes.

Second, if you can't do as Jesus says repeatedly in these so-called apocalyptic sections of the gospels and learn to read the signs of the times, then at least learn from history. 1177 B.C. is

not the only occasion when the established order has collapsed quickly and with little warning. Open your eyes and see what happens to the law and order that we take for granted when something like a hurricane comes through. We've gotten so used to the comfortable afternoon of American prosperity that we are in danger of forgetting how fast it can all change. And when fundamental change begins, people look for those to blame. Jesus warns us, don't think you'll ever be exempt, if you stick out from the crowd the way he calls you to do.

However, in the current moment, it is not we Christians as such who face such threats. You may have heard that there was an election last week. I want to say clearly that I have no interest in portraying anyone in that contest as uniquely a problem. I've heard enough in the last few days about the undereducated yokels who voted for the man who won to be fully aware that one can be a bigot from anywhere on the political spectrum.

But there are two groups that today's text calls especially to mind as dangerous and endangered. As for the dangerous ones, what of the possibility that it is we, God-fearing Americans, who will fill the role of the persecutors in this text? As for the endangered, it is hard to avoid thinking at this moment of our fellow-citizens and others among us who are Muslim.

Hey, preacher, isn't it a stretch to try to apply this text to Muslims? I remind you that in the first article of the fundamental confessional document of Lutherans, the Augsburg Confession, Muslims are referred to as Christian heretics with respect to the doctrine of God. That's not a great place to start interreligious dialog, maybe, but I think there's a positive spin that's as plain as the nose on our proverbial face. Back in the Sixteenth Century, at a time when European Christians were trembling in their boots over the advance of Muslim armies toward Vienna, the Lutheran confessors claimed that all Christians should be able to agree that Muslims worship the same God as Christians, even if wrongly or incompletely. That is, we are brothers

and sisters in the worship of the one God, even if estranged. I'm not making this up; it's right there in the Augsburg Confession.

In response, the least we can do is NOT fill the role in the text of the parents and relatives and friends who betray other believers. Far better is to do the same as I said earlier we need to do for persecuted Christians even in Muslim-dominated lands: pray and advocate for them. Whether you do so because that's what you think America should be, or because you agree that that's what Jesus would have you do, or as an act of missionary witness for Christ, because you understand that even for modern Crusaders, that's the only way that hearts and minds are won—it doesn't really matter. Just maybe, just for today, we can even add a layer of meaning to our use of green on altar and pastors. What matters is endurance and faithfulness to the call of Christ when the going gets rough for you or for others.

There's an overall point that today's text is making that we dare not leave unremarked. Remember how peculiar I suggested was Jesus' concluding comment that not a hair of the head of those who endured would perish, that in fact such endurance would mean gaining life? I don't leap immediately to assume that he's talking about eternal life in heaven. Rather, he is affirming that, in the end, the Psalmist had it right in #96: "Say among the nations: the LORD reigns." At the end of the day, it is not kings and governors, presidents, Congresses, legislatures, or judges who rule. It is God, the one God, and Jesus calls on us to put our very lives in his hands. Moreover, and this is my favorite factoid about Psalm 96, there was an early Latin scribe who added a short note to that verse: "Say among the nations, the LORD reigns"—*a lignum*—from the tree. That scribe got it exactly right. We worship an almighty God who rules the world from a position that the world from the Romans on have always seen as powerless. But he lives and reigns and preserves in life all who endure nevertheless.

And that's the good news this Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost. Good day!