

Don't Give Up!

by Reverend Canon Durrell Watkins, M.A., M.Div.
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THE PROCLAIMED WORD

Context is everything...not everyone understands what we mean when we say things. Our intent does not always match our impact. When I was doing my internship to become ordained in Metropolitan Community Churches, Shawn (another young intern) and I decided we would do a bit of street ministry one day. So we painted signs that said, "The end is near" and we stood on the side of the road to warn people of very real danger. A car came racing by, saw us standing there with our signs and yelled at us, "Go home you religious freaks!" 10 seconds later we heard screeching tires and big crash. Shawn turns to me and says, "Instead of saying the end is near, maybe our signs should say, 'the bridge is out!'"[1] Our signs were not understood in the way we really intended.

Of course, there is a long tradition of people predicting the world's end. In the year 90, St. Clement predicted the world would end at any minute. He seems to have been mistaken. A fellow named Hippolytus predicted the end would be in the year 500. Many Christians in Europe thought the year 1000 would usher in doomsday. Pope Innocent III declared the year 1284 to be the magic date. Benjamin Keach, a Baptist, picked the year 1689 to be when it would all come to a screeching halt. Charles Wesley seems to have thought 1794 might be the year. One of the founders of the Seventh Day Adventists picked a few dates in the 1800s and the Jehovah's Witnesses have guessed at several dates in the 1900s.

What each of these predictions have in common is that none of them came true! But why were these people even trying to make such grim and macabre prognostications? Apparently, they were using some creative and vivid passages of the bible without considering or even knowing the historical context of those passages, trying to decipher them. The passages seem to predict some bloody conflicts, and over the centuries, futurists have tried to guess if the future is now. Revelation is the most famous of those bizarre texts, but segments of the gospels also qualify. Luke 21 is one of those doomsday passages but we may want to look a little deeper to see what it's really saying.

60 or so years before the birth of Jesus, the Roman Empire occupied the land of Israel . Israel and Judah had been subject to various empires, such as the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Persians. There isn't time today to focus on the Isaiah passage, but that reading is a kind of resistance text written in opposition to the Babylonian empire. And by 63 BCE, the Romans decided to invade and conquer the area we often call the Holy Land .

As is almost always the case with imperial and military conquests, the conquered responded with resentment. And over time, the people of Israel experienced Rome to be more and more onerous. They especially found the system of taxation to be unfair (and so you'll notice in the gospels tax collectors are not spoken of fondly).

What many people found even more annoying than the tax burden though was that Rome took over the appointment of the Temple 's High Priest. Imagine the Chinese government deciding to appoint the Dalai Lama or the Russian government deciding to appoint the Russian Orthodox Patriarch, or the Governor of Alabama deciding to appoint the president of the Southern Baptist Convention, or the Italian Prime Minister deciding to appoint the Pope. One wouldn't need to be Nostradamus to predict resistance in those cases, and yet that is what Rome was doing...choosing the High Priest for the Jewish Temple. It was a scandal. It was an insult to an entire people's heritage and identity.

The result of this government take over of the Temple administration was that the highest religious official who led the most sacred ceremonies, increasingly was someone who willingly collaborated with Rome . The Jewish Temple was more and more a Roman institution, led by

people appointed by Rome who earned the appointment by being friendly with Rome . And more and more, the people were outraged.

Early in the first century, a new group formed to express discontent with Roman rule. These new revolutionaries called themselves *Ka-na-im*...the Zealots. You will remember that at least one of Jesus' disciples was a member of this group – Simon the Zealot!

The anti-Roman rebels, these Zealots were active for more that 60 years, and they finally instigated the ill-fated Great Revolt of 66 CE. They believed that all means were justified in the pursuit of political freedom and religious liberty. In the year 66, when the Roman procurator Florus stole vast amounts of silver from the Temple , the revolutionaries viewed that as the last straw and they responded with violence and launched a revolt against Rome .

For various reasons, Rome didn't respond with full force at first, but in the year 70 (four years into the revolt), that changed and mighty Rome unleashed its fury on the Jewish people and breached the city walls of Jerusalem and destroyed the city and its Temple . The Jewish world was devastated...an era had come to a violent end. And thereafter, writers would sometimes write about the end of time or the end of the age, and those writings about the "end time" are part of literary genre we call apocalyptic literature.

Scholars can't seem to agree on the actual date that Luke was written, but we can be pretty certain that it was between 85 and 120 of the Common era. So, at least 15 years after Rome has decimated Jerusalem and destroyed its holy Temple , someone we are calling Luke writes this gospel. And the 21st chapter of Luke's gospel begins by recalling the Temple . In the first four verses we see a faithful widow giving to the Temple treasury, supporting the Temple with all she has. And that scene leads immediately into the story we read this morning.

So when we read Jesus predicting the end of the Temple , what we are reading is Luke remembering the end of the Temple , and using Jesus as a symbol of hope and healing in the aftermath of that terrible time of destruction. Knowing what has happened, we hear very differently these words attributed to Jesus, "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified..." When you hear of wars and insurrections? Hello, of course you are hearing of them, because we are suffering the results of them. And in the midst of this calamity and heartache, Luke in the spirit of Jesus using the memory of Jesus says, "Don't be terrified!" And he follows that by saying, "Don't give up." Verse 19, "By your perseverance you will secure your lives."

These texts "predicting" an end are not telling us what is to come, but rather what has come to pass. The futuristic language is in response to a present feeling of helplessness. They dare not name the situation directly for fear of reprisal, so they write as if they are telling the story before it happened, predicting it and promising healing beyond it. They are not warning future generations of destruction, they are attempting to console people who have already lived through destruction. They aren't meant to terrify the comfortable; they are meant to comfort the terrified. And the message beyond the startling imagery is, DO NOT GIVE UP HOPE. When you have nothing else, don't give away your hope.

The point of the apocalyptic imagery isn't that calamity might happen, or even that it will happen, but rather that it HAS happened and people of faith are to face the difficulty and dare to resurrect hope within themselves and continue forward. The point isn't that harm will come, but that ultimately the forces of destruction cannot prevail; not that destruction is near, but that construction is possible; not that there will be an end, but that the end we have already suffered is being followed by a new beginning.

Apocalyptic literature isn't meant to cause us to throw up our hands and wait for destruction...it is meant to cause us to roll up our sleeves and get to work making things better again. We've all faced an end...it may have been scary or difficult or uncertain or overwhelming...but we learned that "by not giving up, we gain life." Keep going...don't give up hope...don't give up, period.

“Behold I I have left an open door before you which no one can close!”[2]

“They that hope in the LORD will renew their strength, they will soar with eagles’ wings; they will run and not grow weary, walk and not grow faint.”[3]

“Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.”[4]

In the moment of grief, don’t give up.

In the grip of addiction, don’t give up.

In the hour of loneliness, don’t give up.

In the moment of betrayal, don’t give up.

In the struggle for equality, don’t give up.

In the journey toward health and wholeness, don’t give up.

We aren’t saying the devastation of the past wasn’t real, but our sacred texts tell us that the difficulty behind us or even at hand need not be the last word in our story. Be encouraged; don’t give up. The end we have lived through is also the opportunity for a new and wonderful beginning. This is the message of these apocalyptic texts, and this is the good news. Amen.

THE AFFIRMING WORD

The future is mine to create.

I will not give up.

The past is behind me.

I will not give up.

There is power in this present moment.

I will not give up.

God is blessing me now!

And so it is!

[1] Copied/adapted from the Internet

[2] Revelation 3.8

[3] Isaiah 40.31

[4] Psalm 30.5