**"Living in the Paroxysm: Then and Now"**

**A Sermon for University Congregational Church, Wichita, Kansas**

**Sunday, November 14, 2021**

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Traditional Word

The Destruction of the Temple Foretold

13 As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" 2 Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

3 When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, 4 "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" 5 Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. 6 Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' [a] and they will lead many astray. 7 When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. 8 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs. – Mark 13:1-8

Contemporary Word

Resilience allows us to remain steadfast in the face of overwhelming pressure, but at the same time, it gives us a stubbornness that refuses to acknowledge both the necessity of change and the inevitability of defeat.

Yes. Resilience is great for weathering the storm, but you need persistence to get out of the rain.

--From, an online thread on resilience.

"Living in the Paroxysm: Then and Now"

The French writer and philosopher Voltaire said: "One great use of words is to hide our thoughts." And that's what I had to do with today's sermon title. The original title (and the one I wrote the bulk of the sermon under was) "Living in the End Times: Then and Now." But I was worried about triggering some unpleasant memories for some of us—especially for me. That title: "Living in the End Times," sounds like something you'd read passing the Bible Believers Tabernacle or some other fundamentalist church sign. Out of an abundance of caution, I finally changed the title of this sermon to a more euphemistic "Living in the Paroxysm: Then and Now." That's not scary at all, right?. And I've heard that more than a few of you had to hit the dictionary when the title was announced. "What's a paroxysm? And why are we living in one? A paroxysm is defined as a sudden attack or violent expression of a particular emotion or activity, or in medicine, it usually means a sudden worsening of symptoms. And I want to use it this morning as a way to think about what is happening in our world today. You see, it's ALWAYS the End Times. Let's just get this out of the way: It is ALWAYS the end times. We are ALWAYS living in the paroxysm.

What do I mean by that? Well, for one group or another, the apocalypse is always right around the corner. Repent, for the end is near! For some Orthodox Jews, the end times will come when their Mashiach, or Messiah, appears—and some Rabbis teach that there is the possibility of the Messiah to be born in every generation. The possibility. Devout Muslims are awaiting the Mahdi, a teacher, and prophet who will lead the faithful in a great war culminating in a worldwide caliphate. For our Christian friends, who hasn't heard of the Rapture—that often misunderstood scripture that became a golden goose for the authors of the "Left Behind" series. Even Buddhists and Rastafarians get in on the end times/messiah game. It seems like to be a religious person in the world today; you must have a focus on the end of the world. Why this preoccupation with the end times when the present needs as much care and attention as we can give it?

In Jesus' day, everyone was concerned about the end of the world. Fear is such a great motivator, and if you can persuade a large enough group of people to believe in your prophecy, your answer to what is causing the fear, then you have the makings of a movement. In Mark's gospel, we find an interesting little nugget of scripture called, appropriately enough, the little apocalypse. Let's listen to the author of Mark's gospel and see if we can discover what was frightening our ancient brethren so much:

"13 As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" 2 Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." 3 When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, 4 "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" 5 Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. 6 Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' [a] and they will lead many astray. 7 When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. 8 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." – Mark 13:1-8

Most authorities regard early Christianity as a fervently apocalyptic religion, intent on the imminent "Second Coming" of Christ to preside over the Last Judgment and the end of the world. Early Christian apocalypticism is evident in the Gospels, which are filled with prophetic language taken from Daniel. This so-called Little Apocalypse is a sermon by Jesus that foretells the coming tribulation and chastisement before the arrival of the "Son of Man" who will "sit upon the throne of his glory" and separate "the sheep from the goats." There are many apocalypses in the Bible—the entire book of Revelation is an apocalyptic book, and the genre was prevalent during the first century of the Common Era. We, humans, are sometimes fascinated by the end of the world, and some of us take this very seriously. Others of us understand that every day is judgment day for someone. Every day is an armageddon for some of us. For some of us, the world ends today. For the rest of us, well, let's just be thankful for our resilience—so we can live in the paroxysm.

Last week we were fortunate to have Ann Fox with us, and she and I had a good discussion on resilience. I want to point out again that your skills in living resiliently are largely ignored—but there are so many resilient people in this room right now. And I see your resilience each time you walk back into this place. Those of you who came to us from traditions that deal in judgment might have difficulty understanding that the Holy One doesn't hold you in the judgment that you thought—at least not how we interpret God's justice. What if you were being judged on how loving you were instead of whether or not you checked off a list of correct behaviors? What if your "judgment" was based on two simple things: your love of God and your love of neighbor. What if THAT was all you were responsible for? Then that would undoubtedly make it easier to pick yourself up, dust yourself off and start all over again, no?

Resilience allows us to remain steadfast in the face of overwhelming pressure, but at the same time, it gives us a stubbornness that refuses to acknowledge both the necessity of change and the inevitability of defeat. And yet, there's one other piece: Resilience is excellent for weathering the storm, but you need persistence to get out of the rain.

So what if today is YOUR judgment day? I hope not—but what to do with the time we are given? One of my first classes in seminary had the professor asking us, "What would you die for?" At the time, I recall thinking, why on earth are we talking about giving up our lives? This is seminary. I'm supposed to be learning about church history and how the Bible was written, stuff like that. I didn't sign up to "give up my life" for anything. And yet, the more I studied, the more that question haunted me. What would I die for? Would I die for my beliefs? What would that look like?

We have a great example of someone dying for their beliefs in the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., whom the chancel choir just sang about so beautifully. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s final months on this planet were tense, filled with acrimony, and had the good Reverend on edge. He lived in a great paroxysm—the Civil Rights movement of the '60s. He confessed to his long-time aide, Tavis Smiley, in 1968, that he was thinking about death all of the time. The comedian and political activist Dick Gregory said that King once looked at him with tears in his eyes and said he was confident that he would be killed. He knew that he was putting himself in harm's way every moment he pursued his dream of racial justice and an end to poverty.

Some poor unfortunate soul decided to engage with a sinister force and silence Dr. King. Someone was led to believe that Dr. King's life needed to be sacrificed to maintain the status quo. Someone thought that they had not only the right but the duty to silence Dr. King because they disagreed with what he was saying. All decent people shed a tear the day his voice was silenced. All moral people felt the earth tremble, and the temple began to crumble because this great man's voice had been silenced. A voice that was indeed preaching against the status quo—against empire. But instead of engaging in an honest conversation with what Dr. King was doing, the sinister ones had their way. They found a pair of hands willing to do their dark work. And he did it. And he killed a great man. They silenced a powerful and essential voice. And many of us were bystanders who did nothing then and still do nothing—we shake our heads, and we lament the violence, but far too many of us secretly approved of his assassination—because Dr. King was a threat to the power of the established order.

Dr. King created a paroxysm in our society—a spasm—a sudden increase in the energy surrounding his work. Once again, a paroxysm is this sudden attack or expansion of an emotion or an idea. It is often used pejoratively, especially in medicine—you'll see it often in the cause of death line on a death certificate—but I want to challenge us to think of the potential positive benefit of a paroxysm—a paroxysm of love. What might that look like?

I had a really great boss when I first hired on at USD 259, and the school I was working in was undergoing some significant changes to how it was operating. This inspiring human, Doyle Wilcox, told me that you could get an awful lot of good done during times of uncertainty and change. During these spasms that occur during times of change—a paroxysm. And then, he proceeded to model precisely what he meant as he implemented some long overdue procedural changes. What I learned was this: there are positive outcomes we might experience even in the seemingly worst of situations.

Are you just sitting around waiting for the end of your world? Are you just sitting around, waiting for the next Netflix series to binge-watch to become available? Are you just sitting around waiting for someone else to take charge of your life and make things better? Are you sitting around waiting for someone else to do the hard work of creating a more just world? Or are you going to get off of your paroxysm and get busy—get working on a way to bring about a more just world?

People will ALWAYS be waiting on the Messiah. Always. Paul thought the second coming was going to happen next week—that's why he told some of his followers not to worry about getting married because the Messiah was returning ASAP. And still, some of us wait. We always want someone to come along and magically make everything better—without us doing the hard work. But what if the second coming of Jesus has already happened. What if the church is the second coming? What if this is it? What if we are always going to be living in the End Times? What if we will always exist in the paroxysm? Why don't we make the best of it, then, and try to love God and neighbor?

The sinister force that captures the imagination of some people—the unsympathetic voice that tells us that someone got what they had coming—the voice that has us jump straight to judgment without considering all aspects of the situation—that is something the Holy One would want us to ignore—to avoid. When the world is in a paroxysm, a spasm of change, then THAT is the time for those of us with faith to say: "Whoa—yes, times are crazy, yes, people are doing and saying things that they ordinarily wouldn't, yes—it's scary and the ground feels unsteady—but we, people of faith, can be that solid, loving presence that doesn't need to judge—in fact, we don't need to do anything at all except to bring God's peace and offer the abundant love of the Holy One.

Every day is someone's armageddon. Every day is a judgment day for someone. Death is right there, walking with us, ready to lift its hand toward us. And because we followers of Jesus know that the Holy One walks with us, we need to empathize with all who are put in our path. We may be the only loving presence some people encounter their entire day—and we should acknowledge that and hold fast to the fact that by being a force for love and for God's justice, and we should recognize that we are NOT engaging with the sinister forces that want us to judge—that wants us at each other's throats. The principalities that say your only worth is your net income and your ability to consume, consume, consume.

Remember Dr. King's dream. It was and is a very simple dream. And yet, it still causes a paroxysm because to realize Dr. King's dream, we must confront some ugly truths about ourselves. Listen to Dr. King's words:" I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today."

**Resources Used**

Holy Bible, NRSV

<https://www.reddit.com/r/Showerthoughts/comments/8y7qeu/resilience_is_both_a_blessing_and_a_curse/>

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-perspec-flash-mlk-king-assassination-0401-20180327-story.html>

<https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety>