

When I was going through the worst few days of Covid, my mother helped out by dropping off quarts of China Wok hot and sour soup, which I found to be a far superior decongestant to over-the-counter cold medicine. The restaurant always threw a couple fortune cookies in the takeout bag, which are not my favorite dessert, but of course a Lab will eat anything, so I'd break them open, read the fortune, and give the dog the cookie. Except for the time I broke one open and found that it was empty and had no fortune. (I have bad luck with fortune cookies in general; one time I got a perfectly sealed package that didn't even have a cookie, let alone a fortune.) Now, I'm not a superstitious person, but when you're trying to recover from an illness that has been raging at the level of world-wide pandemic for going on three years, you really don't want any cosmic signs that you maybe don't have a future. And then I started to read all of the apocalyptic biblical passages that end our liturgical year and begin the season of Advent...

When we encounter this genre of apocalyptic literature in the Bible we should pause to remember that "apocalypse" doesn't mean "the end of the world" but "revelation" in the sense that something that has been hidden is being revealed. Jesus lets his disciples in on a little secret: the magnificent temple, the largest and most ornately decorated building they had ever seen, was going to be completely destroyed. In Jesus' mouth, these words are a warning about the future. But in Luke's gospel—written about a decade after the Jewish-Roman war—the destruction of the temple is already history. Jesus' disciples want signs to help them know when Jesus' predictions will come true; Luke's church knows they can trust Jesus' words because what he said had already happened.

The Lutheran Church doesn't focus so heavily on end-times predictions as some other branches of Christianity do. But it's hard not to hear the dire signs in these passages and wonder whether some of our current events are reflective of Jesus' words. We certainly learned what living through a plague is like. We seem to barely recover from one earthquake, hurricane, or flood before another environmental disaster strikes. We see nation rise against nation, and it's hardly an exaggeration to say that our nation is at war within itself. We've just concluded an anxious election; in a couple weeks some of us will gather around Thanksgiving tables where parents and brothers, relatives and friends just may engage in the kind of contentious conflict that Jesus challenges us to endure.

Yet, we have to ask ourselves: In the scope of human history, is our experience unique? When our pandemic first began, historians unearthed Martin Luther's words urging compassionate responsibility as repeated outbreaks of the Black Death threatened his community half a millennia ago. Although we could not have imagined how devastating Covid would be and how much it would disrupt almost every area of our lives, I think of Luther's contemporaries, with so much less scientific and medical knowledge, without tools and treatments to protect and prevent the spread of disease, and I have to imagine they believed that *their* Plague, which wiped out at least a third of

Europe, had to be *the* plague mentioned in these biblical predictions. The same could be said of wars: the Crusades, the the Civil War, two World Wars...each time soldiers thinking, surely *this* is what Jesus was talking about.

I don't say that to minimize our suffering. I got my start in public ministry in youth and camping, so I have some experience with young people who are often told, by well-meaning adults who have more life experience, that the challenges they are facing aren't that big of a deal. With the perspective earned over a lifetime, we know that the failed middle school math test doesn't mean the end of career aspirations, or the junior year breakup does not mean a future without love. But with the passage of time it's easy to forget that those failures, disappointments, and losses *are* the whole world to the young people who are suffering through them—and we sometimes fail to be as compassionate as they wish we would be. In the history of trying to make people feel better, I doubt anyone has ever succeeded by telling someone that other people have it much worse. The spouse who was widowed or the child who was orphaned by Covid doesn't grieve less than the widows and orphans of Luther's Plague. Human suffering is not a competitive sport.

There are really two ways to look at the signs Jesus mentions. On the one hand, we could say that *nobody* has accurately interpreted their own circumstances as the subject of Jesus' warnings, because every generation has wondered...yet here we still are. In that case, we'd be tempted to keep dreading even greater calamities as we wait for one of these wars to be *the* war and one of these earthquakes to be *the* earthquake. But the opposite could also be true: Maybe it's not that Jesus' words haven't applied to *anybody* but that Jesus' words apply to *everybody* who has witnessed suffering in the world around them and prayed for the swift return of Christ. Because that is the context in which these words are spoken: the end to which Jesus refers is the culmination of God's redemptive work in our world. That's why we read these passages before Christ the King Sunday and in Advent before we celebrate the coming of Christ. When our world seems most perilous, we look to the One who has promised us hope, peace, and reconciliation: Emmanuel, God With Us. In our struggle, we are reminded to look eagerly for God's compassionate presence. That's what compassion means after all: com-passion; to keep us company in suffering. That's what God did for us on the cross; that's what God continues to do for us through community—when others who carry the image of God reflect God's light and love to us in our need, and when we who carry the image of God reflect that light and love to others.

Our world is a mess—environmentally, politically, economically, in terms of health and sickness, in the tenuous bonds that hold our families and communities together—or don't. But these are not signs that something awful is coming; these are reminders that the God who loves us and even descended to the dead to suffer with us assures us that no trial will be one we face alone. And that is how, even in the most dreadful of circumstances, we can say in truth, thanks be to God.