

“COPPER COINS AND LEAF SPROUTS—THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS COMING!”

A Sermon for the 26th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, November 13, 2016

Text: Luke 21:5-19

“Nation will rise against nation,” Jesus said, “and kingdom against kingdom.” Sounds like the same guy who said “The poor you always have with you.” Fatalistic, if you ask me. Not my favorite Jesus.

But I hope you brought your mental scissors this morning, because I want to help you to distinguish between some words of Jesus and other words of Jesus, to understand their force and function. Because the Jesus who said “Nation will rise against nation” is not a different Jesus from the one who said “Let the little children come to me” and “Come to me, all who labor and are bearing heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” Same voice, different truths. But as we sharpen our hermeneutical skills, please do not lose sight of this latter aspect of our Lord Jesus, who is the earthly face of the God of all mercy and compassion.

Because there is truth, and there is Truth. And it’s the latter that Jesus is really about.

On the one hand, there is the truth about the world. The way it is, the way things should be, the way people should be.

On the other hand, there is the truth Jesus brings to the world, which interrupts that other truth. This is the truth we call the gospel. The gospel of the kingdom. The gospel of the forgiveness of sins. The truth which Jesus is talking about when he says “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” That is not the same as the truth about the world, how it is and how it ought to be and how bad it will be if things are not straightened out.

When we hear Jesus say “Nation will rise against nation,” or “The poor you always have with you,” or “Sufficient unto the day is the evil there is,” Jesus is

telling the truth. When he says that if you call your brother a name you are in danger of judgment, he is telling the truth. Even when he says you should do unto others as you would have them do unto you, he is still telling the truth, that truth, which is that because you don’t, because you are guilty of doing to others instead as they have done unto you (= payback), you are in danger of judgment and the world is going to hell in a handbasket and nation will keep rising against nation.

“I have known pessimists, and I have known optimists,” someone once said, “and the pessimists were invariably better informed.” That’s this first sort of truth I’m talking about. Jesus didn’t deny it. He didn’t close his eyes to it. He never said it wasn’t so.

But it made him weep. And ultimately it made him die.

On the other hand, there is truth as good news. The same good news today that there was for the people of a certain downtrodden bit of real estate in the fertile crescent back in the first century, when great empires had turned their promised land into a military highway. And the good news is that right here, in the world, where nation rises against nation and there are wars and insurrections and earthquakes and droughts and famines not only in the earth but in society and in our personal lives, right here God is doing a brand new thing which contradicts and contravenes the designs of the mighty of the world.

God is doing a new thing. It seems innocuous. inauspicious. Paltry, even. But it has overcome and is overcoming the world. God is doing a new thing. That new thing is the truth which Jesus speaks and

brings and is. Let me call it “the truth of Jesus.” The truth which looks unblinking at the ugliness in the world and sends against it nothing stronger than a word of counter-truth: forgiveness and peace. The unity of all. Communion.

The word of the gospel is not a new twist on the word of the Law. The gospel opposes the law. Just like Jesus, when he stood against a mob of law-obeyers who wanted to stone a woman caught in adultery.

When we read that Jesus said “Nation will rise against nation,” we are not reading what Jesus was going to make happen. We are hearing that Jesus knows where we live. He knows our address, and what day it is. To know what Jesus wants to have happen, we need to read with an ear for the good news. We find it three places, this “truth of Jesus.”

First of all, what does Jesus propose in the midst of war and plague, danger and persecution? He suggests we talk. That’s right. Testify. That Jesus Christ is Lord of all, or whatever the Spirit gives us in that moment by way of a testimony to Jesus. He does not say to arm ourselves, or to make ready superior arguments. It won’t look like much, but it does look like what Jesus did on Good Thursday and Friday.

Secondly, Luke sets us up today’s reading by sharing a story which took place at the temple.

Jesus looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.”

There is a comparison going on here. A parallel. On the one hand, boatloads of contributions by wealthy people—versus two copper coins given by a widow. On the other hand, In our gospel, wars between

armies fighting over who is going to be king—versus you standing up to say “Jesus Christ is Lord of all.”

Thirdly, we get another hint in the continuation of Jesus’ apocalyptic talk, a few verses on in this chapter. He says:

Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

Now, if you look at a tree at the point Jesus is talking about, in the spring when the leaf sprouts are just beginning to show, what you see is all deadness. Gray bark upon gray bark. You cannot tell if the tree is alive or dead. If it looked this way in the summer, you would know it was dead. But guess what! It is not dead! And the way you can tell is that there are these eensy weensy sprouts of leaves bursting out of the tips of every single twig. Thousands of inauspicious testimonies to the future of that tree. You don’t need me to tell you what those microdots of green are saying: life is present, and is bursting out.

Likewise, Jesus says, you—whenever you want to give up your faith in what I have told you—don’t. As surely as sprout gives way to leaf, so surely will the kingdom of God come, and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Two pence is nothing in the eyes of the world. People have even stopped picking pennies up off the ground. But when Jesus saw that poor widow demonstrate her faith in God and her love for God and for others, he saw more than two copper coins. He saw leaf sprouts, He saw testimony. He saw you and me loving God because we love the truth of Jesus. He saw that the hope he came to give us would not die with him, but last forever. Amen.