

NEW HEAVENS AND A NEW EARTH
ISAIAH 65:17-25; LUKE 21:5-19
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This past week I had the pleasure of golfing with some old friends. We have been going out to play as many holes as possible on Veterans' Day for nearly twenty years. The course we play is in the Pocono Mountains.

There we were at 9am on a beautiful fall day. Temperature in the mid-50s. Blue sky with patches of white. It is why in Pennsylvania they say God is a Nittany Lion fan – because like Penn State's colors – the sky is blue and white.

The first hole is a winding lush fairway separated from the green by a trout stream. Taking a back swing, keeping my eye on the ball I brought the club-head down and felt a surge of burning pain in my right shoulder as if someone stabbed my arm with a knife. The ball dribbled to the right and bounced off a tree trunk. Not a good start I thought to myself. In the course of the day one friend told me of his recently diagnosed arrhythmia problem and a third member of our foursome was riding in a cart because, he said, an old knee injury would not let him walk the course.

Twenty years ago we played 36 holes on Veterans' Day. "We'll be lucky to get 18 in today," I thought. Time is taking its toll.

The lectionary this morning takes us to Luke's little apocalypse – the end time. Were it not for the lectionary we might never get to this disturbing little scripture. But, dealing with the end of history is not a bad exercise especially when you live in a culture that fancies itself as being perpetually young.

The point of Luke's story like the point of my aches and pains golfing story is that there will come a day when time will take its toll on creation. Nothing lasts forever. God will use that time to vindicate his people.

When Jesus and his disciples entered Jerusalem they passed by the Temple. A beautiful and massive structure. It had permanence written all over it. But Jesus said not even the big stones of the Temple will last. Someday they will be rubble. History comes to an end.

Then Jesus gave his followers a checklist to recognize the end time. It seems uncannily relevant to our time: wars and insurrections, check; nation will make war on nation, check; earthquakes, famines and plagues in many places, check; in the sky terrors and great portents – do holes in the ozone layer count?

Friday night we heard Doug and Nancy Kirkpatrick's son, David give a fascinating presentation entitled, "The Bible and the Ballot Box." David is a reporter for *The New York Times*. He covers right wing religion. He said many of those he has talked with believe that history will end just as the Gospel of Luke says it will.

But there is another view of the end of time among Christians that says the end will be preceded by a period of sustained peace.

Yet, whether you are of the signs and portents school or the peaceful end school the inescapable fact is that God's creation will come to an end.

And whether we are now living in the end time or not we are surely living in a time that reminds us of how fragile and delicate the web of life is.

In October I led a discussion in our adult education program entitled, “The Purpose-driven life.” I referred to a book by Rick Warren of the same title that has sold 60 million copies. We wondered in the class why a book with that title would sell so many copies. We concluded that at least one good reason is that since 9/11 life seems more fragile and is not to be taken for granted. Here one day, gone the next. Whatever we do then becomes more important. We don’t have time to waste. We must live with deep meaning and purpose.

So whether it is the times, your own aging body or the melting polar icecap – the subject of another sermon – my hunch is not a few of us live today with a sense of the fragility of life on earth.

The question today is what are followers of Jesus to do – given the post-election blues that are now being experienced and *were inevitable for at least half the nation before* the election – the question today is when we see the world starting to pass away, when we see things we thought were permanent fading and decaying what do believers do.

Some advise the hoarding approach. Stock your food closet, buy a gas generator, store fresh water. I remember an elderly man in the last congregation I served. He grew up during the depression. Lived alone. His house was neat as a pin but the stairway to the basement was lined with hundreds of cans of food. A palpable fear gripped him. What if the end comes and I don’t have enough, he asked. Who will look out for me? I had better stock up.

We live in times when we can hear the social and political teacups rattling in the closet. Who knows if the big earthquake is coming or not? The question is how do we live our lives? What does the Bible advise? What do our core values say when the world feels fragile and temporary?

Luke warns some will claim to speak for God. They will call us to follow them. “I am he,” they will say, “the Day is upon us,” they will proclaim. “Do not follow them,” says Jesus. “Do not be misled.”

I confess invocations of God’s will for either candidate in the last election fell into this category for me. I was also distressed to see and hear gay marriage defined in so many states as a moral/religious issue God would oppose.

When things reach this kind of impasse, when one gay bishop turns the entire Anglican church with tens of millions of members world-wide on its ear, when the sea-level rises because of the melting ice cap, when we hear increasing casualties each week from the war in Iraq *it is tempting* to think not that God is calling us but that God has abandoned us.

But to fall into the trap of fear is to fall into the problem of our times. Fear. Rather, Jesus counsels today not to assume that God is absent but that God is along side each of us.

As I read Luke and Isaiah today I hear the Bible saying something like this: These things must take place. Do not lose heart. God never promised to lead you around trouble in the world; only to lead you through it. Do not be terrified or afraid.

But hold on to one another and follow Jesus through. By your endurance you will gain your souls. Even though this world is passing away and will pass away someday, God will make new heavens and a new earth.

You see rather than splintering in these times, Christian communities need to be uniting. Rather than huddling in fear Christian communities need to be witnessing with confidence that though the times are uncertain, God's love for every person is sure. God's vision of abundant life for all is what the church offers to all.

Come earthquakes, come famines, come hurricanes, floods and wars, even come the election of your worst candidate we are to hold on to one another, because holding on to one another is how we hold on to the Lord.

Many years ago when I was the new associate pastor at North Presbyterian Church in Williamsville I attended a family camping weekend in Allegheny State Park. On the Saturday afternoon many people decided to go on a hike in the deep forest. The group I was with had a compass, the other group had a topographical map.

In our excitement the two groups got separated. A compass or map without the other is useless. When we realized we were alone and with no trail or end to the forest in sight the five or six of us with the compass panicked, briefly. Then we made a pact – we would stick together no matter what. We knew that if we got separated again the risk to our finding a way out would be increased. In fact, I would say it wasn't until we made that pact that we were a group. Previous to that we were just five individuals.

We started walking. We were aware of and looked out for each other.

After being separated once, we were not about to lose anyone this time.

Three hours later we came to a blue mark on a tree. It led to another blue mark. Making sure no one was falling behind we finally came to a dirt road on the other side of the state border in Pennsylvania.

Whether we are in the end times or not, (and I don't think we are), we do live in times that put tremendous pressure on groups of all kinds, families, schools, and churches. Which way is the right way? Who has the map? Where's the compass? Forces are at work that would drive us apart and leave us scattered and alone in this world.

But Jesus says it is precisely in such times that we are to stick together. When the bonds that unite us transcend the issues that divide the world, in short when they know us by our love, we will find God in our midst.

And trust, says Isaiah, that one day when things do pass away God will create new heavens and a new earth that will last forever.

We need to heal as a nation. We need to reaffirm that all of God's people are welcome in the church. Westminster has an extraordinary opportunity to deepen our community and announce our solidarity in faith to the world.

Maybe you saw the recent news that the Museum of Modern Art has raised 858 million dollars to fix its facility and expand its mission. What makes this achievement amazing is that it took place in uncertain times. See how the museum believes in what it does and has faith in its mission and future, say the pundits.

What message would it send to the world were we to exceed our stewardship goal this year; raise the funds not only to maintain mission but to extend it further and higher than it has ever been here at Westminster?

These are times not just to say we need to stick together but to show it with our prayers, our service, and our giving. Amen.