



*"Even if I knew
that tomorrow
the world would
go to pieces, I
would still plant
my apple tree."*

Martin Luther

"PLANT AN APPLE TREE"

Luke 21: 5-19

Pentecost 26 C Lectionary 33

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Our Savior Lutheran Church

West Lafayette, Indiana

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"Pastor, it feels like the end of the world."

If I could have a dollar for every time I have heard someone say that to me over the years of my ministry, I would be a rich man. Losing a job, getting cut from the team, having your best friend move away or getting diagnosed with an unexpected illness may not mean that the universe is coming to an end and Judgment Day is around the corner, but your world is falling apart. What you thought you could count on is crumbling. You are becoming unglued. You have lost your anchor. You are adrift in a stormy sea. It feels like the end of the world.

Jesus' disciples probably felt the same way when they heard him in today's Gospel. Jesus was in Jerusalem in the temple preaching during the last week of his life. The people were admiring the magnificent temple rebuilt by King Herod, The Great. The temple had become one of the wonders of the ancient world. Visitors to Jerusalem admired the temple. It dominated the skyline. Covered in gold, its gleam could be seen for miles. It was a symbol of stability and security. It assured the Jews of their chosen status as the people of God.

Jesus shocks them all by announcing the coming destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 A.D. When that happens, "not one stone will be left upon another and all will be thrown down." Jesus also seems to be talking about the future of his followers. Life would get worse. They would be persecuted, betrayed by their friends and families, arrested, put in prison and even lose their lives. Even more, this would all be a prelude to the End of the World when nation would rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There would be earthquakes, famines and disturbances in the heavens. When the people in the temple heard that, they must have been angry and perturbed . . . or wanted to run and hide. These are hardly words of comfort.

However, then Jesus makes a startling announcement. He declares that this is no time to run and hide but "an opportunity to testify." Notice, he says that this time will be not a danger or threat but an "opportunity." Why? Because "not a hair of your head will perish!" In this time of trial and testing when you will "be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death," when you feel like it is the end of

the world, you won't crumble but "by your endurance you will gain your souls." Opportunity will knock! You will GET TO speak of the hope that is within you.

How can Jesus dare to think that he can offer comfort like this when it surely appears to be a time of crisis? Because the End of the World has already begun! In fact, for us it has already happened. Our fate and destiny have already been determined. When? How? When Jesus died on the cross and was raised again. There God chose to pre-empt God's own judgment of the world so that we might be delivered from the fate we deserve.

It is like that moment when we are about to be executed by the firing squad and someone else takes our place, when someone else slips his head into the hangman's noose when we were sure it was going to slip over ours, or when someone else takes our place in the electric chair and we walk away.

Two weeks ago on All Saints Sunday we remembered our Baptism. The day when we were splashed with water "in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" . . . and we lost everything. Our world came to an end, while at the same time God gave us a new life. It was as if we were there with the disciples in today's Gospel and Jesus said to us, "not a hair of our heads will perish."

The good news gets even better. We already GET TO collect on that promise NOW in THIS life and THIS world.

It's like living with a mortgage. Many of us live in homes with a mortgage. We live there but the bank owns our house. It will not actually be ours until we have made that last payment. Yet, even though it is still not ours, we GET TO live in it NOW, AS IF it already were ours. However, in the case of the mortgage on our home, there is still a string attached. We GOTTA make the payments or we will have happen to us what happens to far too many people around us: foreclosure and eviction!

But in Christ the strings have been cut. God has already paid the mortgage in full. In Baptism God has given us that assurance. Therefore, we GET TO live worry free in joyful anticipation of that day when we will finally collect on what has already been promised to us.

Jesus speaks of that day in today's Gospel. When he talks of the destruction of the temple, "when not one stone will be left upon another, . . ." he is speaking not just of that day in 70 A.D. when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem. He is speaking of that day when we died and rose again with Jesus. He is speaking of our faith today.

When we watch the evening news or scan the internet headlines, we see a world where that is already happening. The End has already begun. The mortgage already now is being burned. Soon we will GET TO collect on what God has promised.

When that Last Day will come, we know not. It could be today, tomorrow, next week, next month, next year, next decade, next century, next millennium . . . or our next breath! But in the meantime, as we wait, we have no fear. Martin Luther was once asked, "Brother Martin, what you would do if you knew that the world would go to pieces and end tomorrow?" We expect him to say something like, "Oh . . . oh! I've GOTTA call my insurance agent, my stock broker, my undertaker, my family and friends. I've GOTTA make sure that everything is ready, that all my ducks are lined up and ready to go. There can't be any loose ends. Lock the doors. Batten down the hatches."

Instead Luther said something totally unexpected. He said, "I will plant an apple tree!"

What he meant by that is that he was not going to worry about the End. He was ready to go and meet his maker. Until then he was going to keep on living life to its fullest. He will continue to carry out his daily responsibilities, caring for the world and his neighbor with complete trust and confidence, certain that whenever he dies or the world ends, it will be glorious.

The same is true for us. We have already received our inheritance. God has made a down payment on the future for us. We have nothing to fear. The day water splashed on us "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," the One who made this vast universe, from the tiniest atom and insect to the most distant star and galaxy has promised to treat us just as he treated Jesus. The worst and the best have already taken place. When we believed Jesus' promise, we died. We let go of everything on to which we were holding. The end of the world happened. At the same time, Christ raised us up to a new life. Nothing or no one can take that life from us.

Trusting that promise, we can do what we did at the beginning of this service in the Rite of Confession and Forgiveness. In world where everyone seems to be making excuses or blaming someone else, we get to tell the truth. We get to come clean. We get to admit that we have messed up our lives and confess our sins. We get to do that unafraid because God has already promised us in the waters of our Baptism that there is nothing we can do to that will ever cause him to revoke the promise he made to us in our Baptism. God makes good on that promise . . . and forgives us!

Trusting that promise, we have the peace that the world cannot give. We can live with freedom joyfully serving our neighbor, seeking to make this world a better place, . . . and with brother Martin planting our apple trees.

In today's Second Reading Paul writes to the Christians in Thessalonica who like many of us had given up on their baptism. Convinced that the End of the World was just around the corner, maybe even next week and certainly in the next year, they had copped out. They refused to work only caring for themselves. Why bother since the whole "shootin' match" was almost over? Why bother to care for some one else?

Paul insists that this turns the good news of Christ upside down and inside out. Christ's victory sets us free from such navel gazing. No longer having to fret about ourselves, we can live with a sense of self-forgetfulness. This life and world are no longer just about us. It is about taking care of the world and our neighbors. Therefore, Paul tells the Thessalonians . . . and us, "Get a job! Others depend on you." Luther says, "Plant an apple tree! Don't give up on the world."

In world where everyone is worried about not having enough, afraid of tomorrow and determined to hold on to what they have, we are free. Confident that "Not a hair of (y)our head will perish," we will not give up on this world or the work of Our Savior church. We are FREE to let go of the stuff of this world that always wants to sink its claws into us and own us. We freely give of our time, talent and treasure to support the mission of this congregation. We work hard and do our best to serve our neighbor.

We plant an apple tree!