

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost, November 13, 2022
“One Stone at a Time” (Luke 21:5-19)

How many of you remember the story of Chicken Little? An acorn falls from a tree, hits Chicken Little on the head, then rolls into a hole in the ground. Chicken Little is confused. She’s sure something hit her on the head, but there’s no evidence of what that might have been. She concludes that a piece of the sky has hit her and soon convinces herself that the whole sky is falling.

Determined to share her experience with the king, she sets out for his palace. Along the way, she encounters Rooster Booster, Ducky Lucky, Goosey Loosey, and Turkey Perky. To each of them, she exclaims, *The sky is falling! The sky is falling! We must tell the king!* And they accompany her on her quest.

Eventually, they meet Foxy Loxy who points them to his lair – a dark, open hole in the side of the hill – and says, *The king is just inside.* Versions of the story go in different directions from here, but after one exciting adventure or another, Chicken Little discovers that what hit her on the head was not a part of the sky, but only an acorn.

We can often resonate with the feeling that *the sky is falling* – especially when we allow anxiety and fear to guide our lives. While Chicken Little only imagines that the world is falling apart, many of us today have a sense that it really is. The world we have trusted to give order to our lives seems to be collapsing. We see the cracks in the foundation and wonder, Is this the end of the world? Is the sky falling?

In our gospel text for today, Jesus speaks not of a falling sky, but of a falling temple. *The days will come when not one stone will be left upon the other.* Although this language may be a bit confusing to us, the disciples would have placed it within the context of an idea conceived by the Jews: *the day of the Lord.*

According to Barclay’s Commentary on Luke, the Jews regarded time as being in two ages. There was the present age, which was altogether bad and evil, incapable of being cured, and fit only for destruction. Then there was the age to come, which was the golden age of God and Jewish supremacy. But in between the ages, there would be the day of the Lord, which would be a terrible time of cosmic upheaval and destruction – the birth pangs of the new age, if you will. The day of the Lord would be a day of terror, a day when the world would be shattered. It would come like a thief in the night.

Alongside this, is the conception of the NT era regarding the second coming of Christ. Luke’s gospel was written around 80 AD – about 50 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jesus had promised he would come again and the church waited for that coming. In this passage, Luke uses the words of Jesus to subtly attach the second coming of Christ to the day of the Lord. However, before the second coming, it was expected that many false claimants to be the Christ would arise and great upheavals would take place. There was also the idea of persecution to come for those who follow Jesus – of which Jesus offers warning in this passage.

As you can see, there is a lot going on the background that would bring meaning to Luke's early readers. So, through the disciples' questions in this passage, Luke addresses the concerns of his audience – the early church – as they wait for the day of the Lord and the second coming of Christ. When Jesus speaks of the falling temple, Luke tells us that the disciples want to know the signs. Jesus then goes on to speak of wars and insurrections, of nations struggling against each other, of natural disasters like earthquakes, famines, plagues, and of other great signs from heaven. These things can be expected.

Of course, many generations before us have witnessed such signs and felt them to be a prelude to the end of the world. Surely, they thought, the end must be near. And when we look at our world today, perhaps we, too, see the things of which Jesus spoke taking place in our lifetime and wonder if we are living in the end times.

The nightly news gives us more than enough day of the Lord images. We're still dealing with the fallout of a global pandemic that not only took the lives of many, but disrupted the lives of many others. Since the start of the COVID outbreak and the months of isolation it caused, drug and alcohol abuse has reached new levels, mental illness is on the rise, and there has been a significant increase in the suicide rate among young adults.

The widening gap between the rich and the poor is being fueled by high inflation, forcing some families to make difficult choices - like choosing food over healthcare and gas over medications.

Interest rates have increased in fear of a recession, saddling consumers with greater debt and making home purchases less affordable. As a result, a record number of young adults are moving back home with their parents. We worry that an economic crisis is on the horizon.

Then there is increased crime and violence. Murder is reported on the news on a daily basis, mass shootings are occurring way too often, and violence from racial tensions is becoming commonplace. It seems that human life is no longer respected or valued.

There is ugly political bickering and backbiting. The issues are many and varied: the events of January 6, what's happening at the southern border, the pro-life and pro-choice debate, the debate over gun control, allegations of rigged elections, government spending, energy, funding or defunding the police, and the list goes on and on.

We hear about the threat of global warming, The news reports historic floods, historic droughts, and historic famines, impacting millions of people.

Then there is international upheaval: Russia at war with Ukraine, China and Taiwan, North Korean test missiles, the resurgence of the Taliban in the Middle East, the government corruption of South American countries, forcing their citizens to seek a better life in the US, and hundreds of thousands taking great risks to arrive here.

When we see all these things, we, too, may wonder, *Is the sky falling? Is the world in crisis? Are we living in the end times?* We are, but then something is always ending. Something is always falling apart. Our word *crisis* has its root in the Greek word, *krisis*, which means

decision. A crisis, then, is a moment to decide. In crucial moments, when life takes a turn, we have to make a decision.

Jesus warns us to be careful in those moments because many will step forward to say, *I am the one you should listen to. Let me tell you how to read the signs. Let me tell you what's going on in your world.* Chicken Little will appear in some form to tell us the sky is falling. It may be someone in government, mandating a lockdown during a pandemic or warning us that unless we *go green*, our planet will not survive.

Or Chicken Little may be the voice of a doctor announcing a serious health issue or the news that all life-saving measures have been exhausted for a loved one.. My family recently experienced such an event. Several weeks ago, the doctors from Baptist called to tell us the sky was falling. She told us that my brother-in-law, who was experiencing a brain bleed, would never recover – might not even make it through the night. But the next day, he was very much alive and was able to talk with us.

And sometimes the Chicken Littles or false messiahs that step forward are our own voices of fear and anxiety coming to the surface.

Jesus tells us that when we find ourselves in the moment when life takes a turn, we should be prepared to testify to the truth. He encourages us to look for and to talk about what God is doing. It is only in God that we can find peace and hope for the future. The story of hope isn't that our planet will survive, or that our nation will be the greatest, or that our foundations are sound, or that our bodies will survive unscathed by illness and death. The story of hope is that our Lord promises to be with us always, even to the close of the age. The story of hope is that God promises to work for the good of those who love him. The story of hope is that God promises to bring life out of death. Therefore, we can be assured that, when everything is falling apart, God is at work. When the sky is falling, God is opening heaven.

So, in our moments of crisis, we must decide to trust God. When the sky is falling and hope for the future is bleak, we must trust that God is on the other side of the devastation. We must trust that God is at work, gathering up the pieces and building something new, one stone at a time. The Apostle Paul reiterates this in 2 Corinthians 5: *If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.*

My friends, we need not fear or fret the future, no matter what signs we may witness, not matter what the voices out there might be telling us. God is faithful, and always will be. Amen.