

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17; Luke 21:5-19
Rev. Michele Ward “Climate in the Pulpit 2023”
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church
Baltimore, MD November 13, 2022

GOSPEL READING Luke 21:5-19 (NRSVUE)

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, ‘As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.’

They asked him, ‘Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?’

And he said, ‘Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, “I am he!” and, “The time is near!” Do not go after them. ‘When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.’

Then he said to them, ‘Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

‘But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name.

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This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.

You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.

One: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

All: Thanks be to God.

As we enter the second week of our stewardship series, the lectionary gives us this challenging passage from the Gospel of Luke. This excerpt follows the story of the faithful widow called “The Widow’s Mite.” She gives her last two coins as an offering to God at the temple in Jerusalem, and receives praise for her dedication to God. Jesus disapproves of this practice, and calls out the religious leaders for praising her financial gifts while ignoring the fact that she lives in poverty and they haven’t done anything to change her circumstances.

Jesus continues his teaching about justice and retribution in the section that we just heard this morning. Here, he turns his attention to the economic injustices of the temple itself. King Herod the Great, the puppet king of Judea

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subservient to the Roman emperor, had rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem. In his rebuilding of the temple, he added an outer court called the Court of the Gentiles.¹ People would listen to music, visit with priests and rabbis, and talk. They would also exchange their money at the Temple in the outer court, purchase animals to sacrifice, and buy religious souvenirs.² We are more familiar with the account of Jesus turning over the tables of the money changers, chasing the animals out of the Outer Court, and generally condemning the practice of exchanging currency and purchasing animals to sacrifice at the temple.

Here, in the Gospel of Luke, we do not simply encounter Jesus turning over tables or herding the animals out onto the streets of Jerusalem. He begins to prophesy and teach about what will come to pass for the temple itself as well as his early followers in the days and years ahead of them. Although the Second Temple that King Herod built is beautiful and grand, it will not last forever. The extravagance of its walls and the impressiveness of its size will not be around for generations to come. The temple will crumble, wars will ensue, families will betray one another, and the disciples will be arrested and brought before political and religious leaders to answer for their beliefs and actions.

¹ Richard Swanson, “Commentary on Luke 21:5-19,” Published November 13, 2013. Accessed November 11, 2022.
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-33-3/commentary-on-luke-215-19-3>

² Richard Swanson, “Commentary on Luke 21:5-19,” Published November 13, 2013. Accessed November 11, 2022.
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Honestly, what a killjoy! Jesus is not acting like the loving, kind, gentle Jesus that we prefer to read about in the Gospels. Instead, he is angry. He is serious. He describes a difficult future that will require sacrifice and change. Jesus does not stand there and praise the beauty of the temple when widows, like the one right before this section, are left to face poverty while being lifted up as examples of generosity. Jesus does not stand there and extoll the practice of money changing when the house of God has turned into a money making endeavor for merchants and money lenders. He does not describe bucolic, easy lives to his disciples.

Remember - he is speaking to colonized, oppressed people living under Roman rule. He is not speaking to the elite or the wealthy. He is speaking to people who live within the confines of a caste system built around their own enslavement and servitude. This is a time when political rulers are viewed as gods and their word is the word of heaven. To live under both Roman political rule and Jewish religious practices means that following Jesus as their rabbi as well as the Messiah was the most risky choice of all.

To speak the truth is a risky endeavor. It is a powerful endeavor. And it is the endeavor to which Jesus calls the disciples and each of us this day. When I think about truth speakers in our own city, I think of the high school students, young adults, and neighbors involved in the South Baltimore Community Land Trust. In 2008, South Baltimore’s 21226 zip code had the highest quantity of

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toxic air emissions from a factory or plant in the country.³ The following year, the state and the city reviewed and accepted a plan to build the largest trash burning facility in the United States. The community would not have it. The current incinerator has been in operation since 1985, burning trash from both Baltimore City and Baltimore County. That is right - if you live in Towson or Lutherville, Roland Park or Homewood, your trash is burned and emits toxic fumes into the air. For every 100 tons of trash the incinerator burns, 70 tons enter the air as toxic fumes and 30 tons enter landfills as toxic ash. But the Baltimore citizens that endure the health risks of the incinerator are predominantly black and brown Baltimoreans living at or below the poverty line. They are the same citizens who had their homes bulldozed to build highways, stadiums, and casinos, all in the name of economic progress. Right before Mayor Scott was elected, the outgoing mayor, Mayor Young, renewed a 10 year contract with BRESKO, the company that owns and operates the incinerator in South Baltimore. South Baltimore Land Trust had been working tirelessly to retire BRESKO's contract and the use of the incinerator entirely. This action at the eleventh hour left them unable to lobby against signing up for another decade of pollution, higher asthma rates, cancer, and other health conditions. We prefer to research these issues at universities and in medical systems rather than address them at the root by getting rid of the source of the toxins that are killing our people and our planet.

³ <https://www.sbclt.org/our-history/>

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The majority of us in the community are not living in the midst of these toxic fumes. But if we burn fuel for energy in our homes, we are potentially surrounded by toxic indoor pollutants. Today we join congregations of many faith traditions across our region in celebrating Climate in the Pulpits with Interfaith Power & Light.⁴ This year, Climate in the Pulpits is a chance to reflect on the harm that burning fuel for energy is causing to our neighbors and to the natural world. Our faith traditions teach the sacred value of repentance. At every moment, we can turn from what is harmful and choose life. In this season of returning, our congregation is joining with many others to turn towards a future in which we don't have to burn anything to heat our communities or our homes and can use clean renewable energy instead.

To do so, we must face the ways in which burning methane gas, in particular, is endangering all of us. For too long, many of us haven't had a choice—burning gas or oil has been the only way we could heat our homes, draw hot water, or cook food every day. But we have come to understand that methane gas causes harm:

- Below ground, the pipes that bring gas to homes leak potent, climate disrupting methane into the air.
- Above ground, burning gas inside our homes hurts the lungs and health of young and old who breathe indoor pollution;

⁴ <https://ipldmv.org/climatepulpits/>

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- above our heads, burning gas pours heat-trapping pollution into our skies, accelerating the climate crisis.

Good folks across our region have been documenting gas leaks in our neighborhoods, and recording dangerous levels of indoor air pollution in home kitchens with gas stoves.

It’s clear that we must turn towards a safer, healthier, and more just future where everything is electric and powered by renewable energy.

In Montgomery County, the Council is currently considering a measure to require all new buildings to be electrified, and we’re calling on every county and municipality in Maryland to do likewise. ***I’d like to call your attention to the bulletin insert that you received this morning (lift it up).***

Today, I ask you to join with congregations across our region in calling on our leaders to guide our communities away from burning, towards all-electric homes and away from systems of pipes that lock us into many more years of methane gas. Please fill out the post card on your bulletin insert so that you can share it as an offering when the ushers pass the collection plate.

Even when we’re gathered online, we can take action together, and in community! I invite everyone to click on the link we’re putting [in the chat/in the comments] right now: ipldmv.org/methane Double-click on that link to open a form where you can deliver a message to your elected leaders: now is the time to stop building homes with methane gas, and to help our communities in turning away from burning entirely.

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