

Being Thankful When Things Go Bad

Preached at The United Church of Los Alamos

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Text: Luke 21:5-19

What a beautiful Sunday!! I hope all of us will have a joyous and nice Thanksgiving Holiday. (Joke)

Change seems to be everywhere. The foliage has changed from its summer fullness to fall and winter scarcity. The air is colder and there is even a hint of snow. Change is everywhere.

As with all changes, some changes will be welcomed and others will not be welcomed. So what do we do if we are among those person's that may not be feeling all that thankful for the changes that are affecting our lives? What if this Thanksgiving we are worried about the potential changes at the lab or concerned about the price of gasoline wondering where will it end? What if this Thanksgiving we are not feeling very thankful?

I was recently home visiting my mother. I stayed with my uncle and aunt who are now in their 80s. During my visit they showed me a film that was discovered when my other uncle recently died. The film was old and was taken during the early 1950s. In the film I was about four or five, my sister about two years of age. My mother was in her twenties. My uncles were young and vibrant. My grandparents, long since deceased were happy and filled with life. As I watched the film my reflection turned to the present. My mother is in a care center and might not be with us for very long. My uncle, a World War II Marine veteran, is now confined to a wheel chair. My other uncle, the one who took the movies, a retired Air Force officer is now deceased. Even one of my aunts, who in the film were showing off her new dress for her high school graduation, is

now deceased. I was struck with how fast things change. There was a note of sadness in the dramatic changes that have occurred over the last fifty years.

Yet, as I reflected on the scene I noted that my uncle is mobile even though he can never walk because he has an agile, motorized wheelchair. The old film we were watching had been digitally re-mastered and transferred to a DVD with a copy available for me to take home. At breakfast my aunt and uncle spread out their daily meds, most of which was not available in 1950. I flew out to California in about three hours flying time (much more in security and airport waiting) ---something that was not practical in 1950. Change---some things change for the better and some things for the worse. How do we be thankful in the middle of all the changes?

Our text today does not seem appropriate for Thanksgiving. The reason is because the Lectionary really does not plan for our National Thanksgiving celebration. This is the end of the Church Liturgical Year. As the year begins the texts talk about the birth of the Messiah. We then move to the theme of the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the long season known as “Ordinary Time” the texts explore the living out of faith in the real world. Yet, as the year winds down—liturgically—the texts turn to the end of the age and the expected return of Jesus. We begin with the “Advent” of Jesus and end with the expected “Advent” or return of the Christ. So each time this time comes up I am tempted to leave the lectionary text---which is fine to do---and deal with something more “thankful”. Yet, in some ways this text is very appropriate for this season. The Church is asked to find thankfulness even in the midst of trouble and despair. We are challenged to find reasons to be thankful even when things are not going the way we would like.

Those who first heard Jesus predict that the grand and glorious Temple would be destroyed could not imagine such a thing happening. The Temple was under reconstruction and was evidently a marvel to behold. It represented the very best of human technology and devotion. The white marble columns glistened as they rose to over forty feet in height. The most famous ornament was a solid gold vine that had clusters of grapes larger than a person. The Temple was covered with plates of gold that reflected the sun and gave the Temple an unmatched brilliance. According to the text, some were marveling at this wonderful temple that honored God. Jesus then spoke.

“As for these things you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another, all will be thrown away.” HOW SHOCKED THEY MUST HAVE BEEN TO HEAR THESE WORDS? **How angered some must have been!**

Yet, by the time Christians heard these words of Luke or read them the Temple was laying in ruins. In 70 CE the Jewish people revolted against Roman dominance. Rome showed no mercy. Over one million Jews died and 97,000 were taken to Rome as slaves. The Jewish nation was no more and would not rise again until the 20th century. The beautiful Temple that seemed indestructible (for surely God would not allow its destruction) was destroyed and remains so to this day.

Those changes sent ripples and tremors through the heart of Judaism and through the young Christian community. Those changes literally changed the paradigm of the Jewish and Christian communities. **There are no guarantees in life except that things will change.**

Jesus recognized that things would change. He shared a litany of disasters with his disciples. He told them there would be wars and insurrections, nations would rise

against nation, kingdom against kingdom. He said there would be earthquakes, famines, plagues, and disasters. We know this to be all too true.

Was Jesus laying out a blueprint for the future as some suggest? I don't think he was. Rather he was stating the obvious---things change sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. Before 70 CE most Jewish persons could not conceive of the Temple ever being destroyed. After 70 CE most could not conceive of it ever being rebuilt.

And what of Rome whose forces destroyed the Jewish rebellion, burned down the city of Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple? The Roman Empire lasted a thousand years. In the year 600 CE, Pope Gregory I wrote a letter. At the time the Saracens were pirating the seas, barbarians had overrun Rome, the western Empire of Rome had collapsed and the power of Rome had shifted to the east—to Constantinople. Gregory wrote, ***“What Rome herself, once mistress of the world has become, we now see. Wasted away with affliction, the loss of citizens, the assault of enemies, the frequent fall of ruined buildings. Where is the senate? Where are the people? All gone. All the pomp and dignity of this world is gone.”***¹

Things change sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. Jesus in this passage suggests we must TRUST IN GOD. This is a curious thing to say after talking about all the bad things that would be happening. Jesus taught that we must be spiritually prepared for times that test our faith and attitudes. Jesus again and again talked about trust---about faith.

Jesus recognized that even if we attempt to prepare we can never fully prepare for the unexpected. It is good and prudent to be prepared. It is good to have our papers in

¹ Quote from Gregory found at www.deaconsil.com/bausch/ord33c.htm.

order, clothing and supplies packed, emergency preparations made for sudden weather. But what if when the fire strikes or the tornado rages we are out of town? What if when the ice storm breaks we are on the road? Jesus recognized that we can never fully prepare—we can never be fully secure.

On a side note this is the myth we are promoting today in our society. Terrorism is a valid threat and a scary one. We should be prudent but at what cost? With all the security and expense at our airports recently a test of the system revealed that bomb making liquids were passed through inspection at nineteen airports. One airport confiscated the shampoo but allowed the explosives through. Of course we need to be diligent but we are fooling ourselves if we believe we can be protected from all things. Jesus recognized that in spite of all the protection we can never be fully prepared.

Yet, in the midst of change we can trust God and we can choose to be persons of hope. This is not hope in magic or fantasy but real true hope.

There is a story of a time when a great flood hit a community. One man was on his porch when a four-wheel drive jeep drove up and offered him a ride. “No, don’t need it!” the man said with confidence. “I am praying to God to help me and I am sure God will answer my prayer.” The rescue workers shrugged their shoulders and went on.

Later as the water had reached the second floor a boat came by the man’s house, which was now looking out his second floor window. “Get in the boat,” they cried, “the water is rising!”

“No thanks the man replied. I have prayed to God and I am confident God will act.”

Later the man was on the top of his roof. A helicopter hovered over the house and dropped him a line. The man refused the line again proclaiming that God would answer his prayer. The man drowned.

Later in heaven the man was very, very angry and made his complaint to Saint Peter. “I prayed and prayed,” the man said, “and you never did anything!” Saint Peter seemed surprised and told the man he would check his records for some error. Coming back to the man Saint Peter said, “I really don’t understand. Our records show that we sent you a four-wheel drive jeep, then a boat, and finally a helicopter. Someone must have really fouled up!”

Faith is not magic. Yet, as things change we are to trust God and to learn to be a people of hope in spite of what is going on. The text in Luke does predict dire things for the future. Yet, the text was in a strange way received as a text of hope. In fact in the time of Luke the church was experiencing radical changes. People were dying. Persecution was occurring. Faith was not translating into well-being but into suffering. Luke reminds the Church that Jesus said that all things would work out in the end. We can be confident that in the end the unseen workings of Good will prevail over the evil that befalls our lives. Thus we can be a people of hope---we can give thanks—even when we may not feel like it.

In 1930 a traveler was exploring the French Alps when he came upon a barren stretch of land. The land was ugly, completely empty. Yet, in the middle of this wasteland he saw an old man, bent over, walking around with a four-foot iron pipe. Every few feet he stamped the pipe into the ground and dropped acorns into the holes. The traveler spoke with him only to discover that he had planted over a hundred thousand

acorns. Perhaps, the man said, only a tenth will survive. The traveler learned that the old man's wife had died and also his son had died in a tragic accident. He had decided to approach life not with what was but with what could be. He had decided that in spite of the tragedy he would be a person of hope reaching into the future. He said he wanted to spend his last days doing something creative and good.

Thirty-five years later the traveler went back and could hardly believe his eyes. The same land was covered with a beautiful forest. Birds were in the trees and wild animals lived among the forest. It was a magnificent sight all the more because he knew it was there because someone cared. It was there because someone hoped and saw something when everyone else saw nothing. It was there because one person chose to be thankful even when he might have felt otherwise.

How can we be thankful when we don't feel it? By recognizing that all is in God's gracious love and that through God endings can become beginnings. Out of ruin come new things.

Janice and I will be returning to California in June. I will be officiating at my nieces wedding. At the wedding will be cousins and their children, hopefully my uncle and aunt, perhaps even my mother will be present. As we gaze across the vast ocean on Monterey Bay I will know once again that all things change but God's grace and love does not. One generation passes the torch to another and out of despair can come hope and renewal. It was Jesus who said, "By your endurance you will gain your souls."

Happy Thanksgiving.