

Almost the End of the Beginning  
The Rev. Amy Spagna  
November 16, 2025 – Pentecost 23C  
Luke 21:5-19

On the liturgical calendar, just as on the "regular" calendar, we are approaching the end of the year very quickly. One easy way to tell that the long green growing season after Pentecost is soon to give way to the preparation and hope of Advent, is that the lectionary starts including selections which describe the end of the world as we know it. What they have in common is an almost fantastical description of both mass destruction, and God doing something new with what's left. "All will be thrown down," Jesus tells the crowds listening to him. And centuries earlier, the prophet Isaiah conveyed God's promise of creating a new heaven and a near earth, where Jerusalem would be a "joy, and its people a delight" (Isa 65:18, NRSV). All of this is setting the stage for the resurrected Christ returning on clouds descending, and the child who was born into a family so poor that his crib was an animal's feed box. For both of these events some preparation is necessary. It starts here, with the first hints of the promise that God is about to do something big, and we will keep hearing about it right up until the big event a short six weeks from now.

To be honest, these kinds of texts make me feel uncomfortable. That is largely thanks to having accumulated a considerable cultural baggage around them. That is thanks to having grown up surrounded by Christians who insisted on taking them as literally as possible. Some also tried to use them to try to show that whatever upheaval we happened to be living through was a sign of the "end times" that only they would be fortunate to survive. So I usually try to avoid dealing with apocalypses if at all possible. This time, however, it just hit differently the first few times I read it. For the record, I do

*not* think we are living through the destruction of the temple that Jesus describes here. What I *do* think is that Jesus means to remind his audience of two things. One, what we think are permanent monuments really aren't all that permanent on God's timetable; two, no matter how bad things might get, God will always be right there in it with us.

What is an *apocalypse*, in terms of Biblical literature?

In Greek, the word *apocalypse* means "revelation." Usually, it takes the form of a prophet receiving and sharing a highly detailed vision of the coming kingdom of God. Hallmarks of the genre include fantastical descriptions of what heaven looks like. It also contains and promises of divine retribution against those who are actively doing harm to the prophet's community, and of future rewards for the persecuted. Most of the ancient apocalypses we still have, from both the Jewish and Christian traditions, seem to be products of communities under a great deal of stress. They are intended as vehicles for conveying hope to the down and out. At the same time, they offer up a challenge to their audiences to change their situations for the better. What they are not are literal predictions of the future. Their language is packed with metaphors, as well as the hopes of their writers for a better future in which God will be highly involved in creating.

These kinds of stories are often hard to manage in our context. We tend not to take seriously people who predict that God is going to swoop in and do the judgment and destruction thing at a set day and time. However, for Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and their communities, that became a reality when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70 CE. They all remembered Jesus had said that something like it would happen. As bad as it would be, it was not a cause worry, because God would be present in it with them. Where Luke's account differs from those of Matthew and Mark is in the intended

audience for these words. Where Matthew and Mark depict Jesus speaking only to the disciples, Luke has Jesus speaking to all of the bystanders who are actively gawking at the temple, and who then ask him "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" (Luke 21:7, NRSV). Luke is interested first in making sure that Jesus' teaching is not just preserved, but understood clearly – hence the warning not to believe the false prophets who will come in Jesus' name to say "'I am he!' and 'The time is near!'" (Luke 21:8)

Luke also wants to show that Jesus' gift for insight also included an ability to make accurate predictions about future events, including how God would go about the task of rendering judgment on the world. As had been the case when the Babylonians wrecked Jerusalem 500 or so years before, Jerusalem's fate is directly related to the injustice and oppression taking place within its walls. Luke also hints that the tangible ways people related to God, symbolized by the temple, would also be destroyed, and that something else would take its place.<sup>1</sup>

It's not really all that comforting a text, is it? The implied warnings about the end aside, part of what Jesus is really talking about is how to manage change. Humans don't like it in the least. Even when we know it's coming, and it's going to be for the better, it still makes us nervous. For one, change shatters the illusion that we have complete control over our surroundings. For two, it makes us feel much more at ease when we know for certain that, say, our favorite food will be on the menu when we go to a restaurant, or that the people whose presence in our lives we count on will be there when we need them. We need time to get used to something new, especially when it's

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew McGowan, "Not A Hair of Your Head Will Perish." <https://abcmcg.substack.com/not-a-hair-of-your-head-will-perish> [accessed November 11, 2025].

as big and life-changing as Christmas and Easter. That need for preparation is exactly what seasons of Advent and Lent are about. It just takes time, and real intentionality, to be able to begin to understand what God did in and through them, and how both totally changed the world. As Jesus says here, the world will be changed yet again, when in the lead-up to whatever "the end" is, the temple will be destroyed, and the people will be given a chance to testify in front of those who persecute them on account of Jesus' name. The only constant is that he will be present throughout all of it to ensure that "not a hair of [their] heads will perish" (Luke 21:18).

So what's this got to do with us?

Similarly to Luke's community, we are living in a time of serious upheaval. The combination of the endless news cycle tossing us around like clothes in a dryer and watching the people around us struggling just to live is more than enough to raise our anxiety to unacceptable levels. Also like Luke's community, we can choose to focus either on all the chaos, or on God's promise of, and presence in, a better future. That starts with what we have done so well in this place for nearly 200 years: generally going about the business of being God's people, looking out for each other, and sharing what we have with our neighbors. The Rt. Rev. Alexander Viets Griswold, who was the bishop overseeing the Diocese of Vermont from 1810-1832, in describing his visitation to the newly formed St. James in the summer of 1826, says this: "The people... are respectable, in point of both numbers and character, and what is still more encouraging, they appear to be united, prudent, and zealous."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Rt. Rev. Alexander Viets Griswold, "Bishop's Address to the Vermont Diocesan Convention of 1826." In *The Documentary History of the Diocese of Vermont: including the journals of the conventions from the year 1790 to 1832, inclusive* (New York: Pott and Amery, 1870), 288.

It is precisely these qualities which allowed our forebears in this place to weather the changes and upheavals of their day, and to help bring that better future into existence. May we, as their spiritual heirs, continue in that work, and take Jesus at his word that by our endurance in the face of everything the world is trying to throw at us right now, we will gain our souls.