

Notice that Fig Luke 21:29-31

Introduction

Children and Time: watch time vs. event time

I do not remember what age I was when I first started caring about what time it was or when I first had my first alarm clock in my room or wore a wristwatch. If my children are any indication, sometime in the mid-to-late primary school years is probably when I started. My kids started to notice clocks and have some need to worry about what time it is. For the longest time, parents are the ones who keep pointing to their watch and telling children they need to get ready or that we have to go NOW or we will be late. About the only time children cared about time is when it is time for an event: "How many days till Christmas? When can I start planning for my birthday? When do we go for ice cream?"

Children Move Slow

Children move slowly in time - as if time is never of the essence. They have an eternity of time to do anything they want. That is because children are in the moment - focused on what they are doing. They see and notice much more of the world around them than we older people ever think to notice. They feel acute disappointment when adults intrude again and again to tell them it is time to go when they are in the middle of having the time of their lives - which seems to be something they feel more often than the rest of us.

Event to Clock Time

Our sense of time changes as we mature. We move away from event time, and we worry much more about clock time. At some point, that automated clock in our bodies that knows within a few minutes what time it is when we wake up has to be replaced by an external clock with an alarm to make sure we do not oversleep. Time starts to be an external force that dictates our lives with so much power we resent that we never have time for what we want to do. At some point, time seems to be an even scarcer commodity that is slipping away from us and we wake to realize we only have so much time left.

Luke's Little Apocalypse

Like a Parent Drawing Attention

In our scripture this morning, we have read from what is often called "Luke's little apocalypse." Jesus comes across like a parent instructing children on the importance of knowing what time it is as He tells us to be watchful for the day of the Lord - when God will bring about the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God upon the earth. On my first reading of this chapter, Jesus is like a parent drawing my attention away from what I am focused on to worry about some events that will happen in the future that I need to be preparing myself for. I do not want to think about what may or may not happen in the future. If you are like me, you struggle to be more in the present. This is to say this chapter in Luke's Gospel is not one of my favorites and there are reasons for that.

Idea End of World

Most of us, when we read about the end of the world, think of death and mass destruction, angry angels doing battle with evil forces, death and judgment. We imagine faithful floating souls ascending or condemned lost souls descending to receive their fiery just punishment. I see the imposing angry image of Jesus in the Sistine Chapel commanding Michelangelo's "Last Judgment" scene. Even the disciples standing next to Jesus seem anxious about what their fate might be.

Illustration: love not Fear

As a child, I remember standing out on the stoop of our home watching with my mother the gathering and approaching thunderstorm with lightning flashing across the sky. I was so afraid as I asked her about the last coming of Jesus. Somehow the fearful and punishing images of the fundamentalist South had found their way into my vulnerable childlike imagination. What I remember my mother said is not exact, but it was reassuring. She said something about how much Jesus loved me and I had nothing to fear from one who loved me so much.

That Gets Lost wars are us and No One Knows Time

That somehow gets lost in these words about the apocalypse. Jesus is love until we start thinking about the end of the world and then a different person comes to mind. What also is lost is the description of the events of destruction and calamity that Jesus foretells is in the future. "Nations will arise against nations and kingdoms against kingdoms." There are going to be earthquakes, famines, and pestilence. Somehow I always missed that what Jesus was describing was not something that God brings about but the things that we human beings have always brought about. Jesus describes our world and its reality.

He adds that we should not be terrified by these things as awful as they are. They are part of the ways of this world that we have always endured. Don't let foolish people pretend to tell you they have the mystery of God figured out and can tell you exactly when the end is near. Don't you think it amazing that Jesus actually said that as clear as anything He ever said? There are Christian writers and preachers who are making a fortune selling their books and preaching their fear doing just what Jesus warned us against.

The End as Blessing

When Jesus talks about the end, He does so not as something to be feared and dreaded, but waited for and blessed by. The image we find in Luke's gospel is one of great relief for those who have endured the gross violence and destructive powers of this world we live in. The description of the events of the end of the world is immediately preceded by Jesus' observation of a poor widow giving her very last coins to the temple. Do you remember that story? We preachers often use the story to encourage giving during stewardship time. But I suspect Jesus saw something darker in what was happening. He saw a pure soul of love so devoted to God that, in her poverty, she gives her last money

to a temple that has no regard for her and her impoverishment. In the judgment story that follows, we are told that the temple will come to an end. The systems of injustice that take advantage of the weakest people of our world will no longer be around. Something far greater is coming upon the earth: God's kingdom where the poor and hungry are fed by a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish, and no one is hungry or goes without. What will come is the fulfillment of the hope of the Jewish people in every age. The end which I feared in watching the gather thunderstorm with my mother is not something to be dreaded but something to be hoped for and prayed for.

The Fig Tree

Away from Future Worry to Present/Event

Right in the middle of the story of the apocalypse are the short verses we read this morning. Jesus, who at first seems to take us out of living in the moment to worrying about the future, brings us back to the present. This Jesus who seemed to be like a parent pointing to His watch and making us anxious about what time it is, helps us to again be like children who are so focused in the moment that they notice so much else that we miss in our anxiousness about the future.

God Here Now

Jesus says that we need to notice the fig tree or any other tree you happen to see near you. Notice the light green tender leaves making their way out of the buds on the tree. When you see those leaves you are assured that spring is not far from now. The cold winter wind is about to come to an end and soon you will bask in the sunshine like turtles on a rock. When you see those leaves, allow yourself to feel hope again. Remind yourself that God is never far away but as near to you and the multitude of moments of grace that await those who are able to slow down and take them into your awareness. Jesus brings us back from our anxious worry about the future into a child's awareness and focus on the present. Jesus is telling us that God is here now and signs of the kingdom are here. Times of peace, joy, and love can be had even when the cold winds of winter blow around us.

Summary: Children during London Bombings

I want to leave you with an image that comes from Barbara Brown Taylor. She said, a friend of mine was eight years old when the Germans bombed London in 1940. She lived in the heart of town with her grandparents, her cousin Bettine, and a big English sleep dog named Blitz, who went with the family to their sandbagged garage when the air raid sirens sounded. 'They shared the shelter with a Swedish couple who had a daughter about the same age. She said, "We saw things in those sandbags no one else saw," she said. "We hunted for gold in them and we found it. 'Then we hid it again. Sometimes we found goblins and fairies too. There was a whole world down there that the adults couldn't see. They sat up on their beds reading their books and when we got too loud they'd say, 'Shhh, we can't hear the bombs: 'Then we would listen too and if the explosions were nearby we would get scared, only the Swedish girl taught us what to do. 'Lie on your back and cross your arms over your chest,' she said, 'and God will protect you: After the bombs stopped we would howl with laughter. We would sneak outside and look up at the sky - the beautiful sky where all that ugliness came from - until some warden came along with his flashlight and shooed us back inside. Then Blitz

would get in bed with us and Grandmother would tell us such wonderful stories. I tell you, we had an awfully good time.”ⁱ

The Good News: future is not feared - God Already Here

This is the good news for those who can hear through all the confusing messages of this world to the wonder of it all. The God who loves us most tells us the good news of the end of the story. And the best news of all is that we children who hate waiting for anything at all, do not have to wait alone. Already, God is near by giving us what we need today, if we can only be in the moment to notice. Amen.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, Bread of Angels, “Apocalyptic Figs,” 159-160.