

November 13, 2022
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 25, Year C
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Isaiah 65:17-25
Psalm 98
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13
Luke 21:5-19

The readings assigned for today reflect where we are on the church calendar. Advent begins two weeks from today. The First Sunday of Advent is the church's liturgical New Year's Day. Therefore today and next Sunday are the last two Sundays of the current liturgical year. Every year those last two Sundays bring us, first, apocalypse, and then, Christ the King. Again, that's apocalypse today and Christ the King next Sunday. This sequence serves to wrap up the church year by anticipating the conflict-fueled return of our ultimately-victorious savior. It also provides a warmup for Advent, during which we anticipate his first arrival.

So, today: apocalypse. In our reading from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, where he will be executed. He warns the disciples: everything is going to change for the worse, and it won't be easy for them. But if they stay the course, they will reap the ultimate reward.

But let's back up. Remember, the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles were written by the same person. Both were written *after* Jesus' death, *after* the Roman destruction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, *after* Jesus' followers began to face severe persecution. The beginning of that persecution is documented in Acts.

In the reading from today, Jesus is still alive and well. The author portrays Jesus as looking forward with a prediction of future events. But maybe that's because the author himself is looking backward for an explanation for those same events. He's trying to answer the questions asked by his community and by the people of every era: How did we get here? What do we do now?

It would be hard to overstate the Temple's importance to the Jews of that time. For first-century Jews, life was ordered around religion, and religion was ordered around the physical Temple. Much of the required Jewish religious ritual took place at, and only at, the Temple. The Roman occupiers knew exactly what they were doing when they tore it down. This defanged the dissent that often ignited there. For the Jewish people, this physical destruction carried spiritual and psychological effects.

There were a lot of efforts to fill the resulting gaps. One was led by those early followers of Jesus. When others asked, "How did we get here? What do we do now?" ... they had answers. Their answers involved choices that were often costly, but they insisted that the price was worth paying.

It's not really fair to make a direct comparison from then to now. I will not be asked to make the kinds of sacrifices those first disciples made. But there are some similarities. We are living through a time of massive upheaval. If there is anything the political right and the political left can agree on, it's that these times feel apocalyptic. In last week's elections, reason seems to have mostly won the day. But the questions remain: How did we get here? What do we do now?

I could go from this to climate change or racism or to LGBTQ-phobia or to Christian nationalism or to bodily autonomy for women or to a lot of other places. There seems to be no end to the concerns that require our attention. Among all that, I want to talk about the COVID-19 pandemic.

We're now two years and eight months into the pandemic and heading into our third pandemic winter. I am *so done* with COVID. I imagine that you are, too. Unfortunately, while we may be done with COVID, COVID is not done with us, no matter how deeply we might wish for that to be true.

Last week I realized that we're two weeks away from Thanksgiving. That's when the numbers began spiking last fall. I checked the data, hoping for some good news, and I learned that the number of hospitalizations due to COVID is actually up about 55% compared to this date last year.¹ A new factor this year is RSV, which has filled the state's children's hospitals.

As far as I know, no one directly related to St. Thomas's has died or been severely debilitated by COVID. It's highly unlikely that anyone has contracted COVID as a result of exposure here at St. Thomas's. There's some good fortune involved in that. But it's not just good fortune. It's also a result of the decisions we all made and the actions we all took, both *in here* and *out there*. I think it's an important accomplishment, one worth celebrating, and it reflects who we are as a community. As a community, we share a core value of caring for others. COVID is a perfect example of how caring for others necessitates caring for oneself.

According to the canons of The Episcopal Church, as your Rector I am responsible for all decisions regarding worship, including those related to COVID. I have made the necessary decisions always in close consultation with your Vestry leadership. Still, in the end, the decisions were and remain mine. As you have probably noticed, I have taken a very cautious approach. Right now, that is most noticeable in the continuing requirement for masks during worship. If you're wondering about the necessity for this, I get it; I've been wondering myself. Masks are required hardly anywhere anymore, and therefore hardly anyone is wearing them. Even other local Episcopal churches have lifted their mask requirements.

Every local Episcopal church also has its own unique identity. An important part of this church's identity is that it has long valued hospitality, particularly hospitality extended to the most marginalized. A long-ago "radical welcome" initiative is why our bulletins still contain everything but the sermon and are therefore 16 pages long. Often that welcome had to do with people who identify as LGBTQ+. We are a church that endeavors to be a safe place for everyone, with a safety is physical, spiritual, and psychological.

Yes, we are done with this pandemic. But it's not done with us. I learned on Friday that a bad case of RSV reached our community. I don't know about you, but thinking about this puts me in a funk. I want to have a "normal" Christmas with my family. I want to have a "normal" Christmas with all of you. Last year's last-minute Christmas Eve switch to Zoom nearly did me in. But when all was said and done, it was pretty okay, because we were in it together. We'll get through the next part together, too. And I'm feeling quite optimistic that we're going to be in a much better place in the spring. Meanwhile, I'm going to ask your patience and prayer as I and the Vestry continue to do our best to make the right decisions for St. Thomas's.

As I worked on this I was thinking about when COVID vaccines first became available and were still hard to get. We were still worshipping on Zoom then. During our virtual coffee hour, someone would announce, “I got my vaccine last week!” And the rest of us would cheer. It was such a small thing, but I know that I will always treasure that memory, because of what it said about who we are and what we value.

How did we get here? What do we do know?

There are a lot of frameworks within which to approach those questions. My job as your priest is to help you look at them from a particular Christian perspective. What I hear in Luke today is, somewhat to my surprise, not so much doom and gloom. No, actually, I hear a lot of reassurance. Apocalypses will come and go. But our savior is never far away. He told us what to do: love our neighbors. Love our neighbors completely and without exception. Love our neighbors even when it’s hard. Love our neighbors, even when we’re filled with blame and recrimination. No matter how bad things look in the world, love our neighbors. That’s the only way we will gain—it’s the only way we will keep—our own souls.

Notes

¹ Connecticut’s COVID-19 DPH Reports Library is on the CT Data website at <https://data.ct.gov/Health-and-Human-Services/COVID-19-DPH-Reports-Library/bqve-e8um>. The report “COVID-19 Update November 10, 2022” is at <https://stateofhealth.ct.gov/content/coronavirus/reports/CTDPHCOVID19summary11102022.pdf>. The report “COVID-19 Update November 11, 2021” is at <https://stateofhealth.ct.gov/content/coronavirus/reports/CTDPHCOVID19summary11112021.pdf>.