

“It’s Not the End of the World”

John Kennedy

Well, I don’t know about you, but it seems like it’s beginning to look — and feel — a little like Christmas. We have snow on the ground, which for all I know might be totally normal for Cleveland this time of year.

We also have Christmas music. It’s probably a cliché, but it does seem like the Christmas music starts playing earlier and earlier each year. We have holiday shopping, obviously well underway. And, of course, another sign that Christmas is near is that today is the first day of Advent: the beginning of a new liturgical year and the beginning of the season, of course, that leads to Christmas.

Personally, I’ve been looking forward to Advent for a while. I love the spirituality of this time of waiting; of preparing for the in-breaking of something new; something essential; something holy. Advent always comes as a welcome opportunity and invitation to reset, to take stock, to turn the page.

But, the problem is that this this morning’s Gospel really seems to clash with all of that. Here we are at the beginning of a new year — the beginning of a season that leads to the most wonderful time of the year — but Jesus doesn’t seem to be talking about a wonderful new beginning; he seems to be talking about the end of the world. His language is opaque and apocalyptic, and it is hard to make sense of.

Heard outside of its Jewish apocalyptic context, this passage sounds awkward and even absurd. I mean, if Jesus were to return on a cloud, as this passage says, where exactly would he touch down? In Cleveland? In New York? Jerusalem? Salt Lake City?

Also, even worse than that, Jesus says that “this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.” Was Jesus wrong?

What a way to kick off Advent!

Well, let’s try to understand what Jesus is talking about here.

This passage is all a quotation from Jesus, and it is taken from a longer discourse that begins as a response to others around him who were admiring the Jerusalem temple. He says that the Temple is actually going to be destroyed, and then launches into the lengthy monologue we hear a part of today.

New Testament scholar N.T. Wright has made the case that Jesus is, therefore, not a failed prophet in predicting that all these things will take place before this generation passes away because Jesus’ concrete historical reference is that of the Jewish-Roman war, which took place a

few decades after Jesus would have said this, and culminated with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD.

This was a cataclysmic event for the Jewish people who lived and suffered through it; it was the end of the world as they knew it. Insofar as these events could be understood as a vindication of the Jesus movement and even a divine judgment in Jesus' favor and against those who rejected him, they could also be described, in accordance with the Apocalyptic genre of this passage, as "the coming of the Son of Man" or the in-breaking of the kingdom of God.

Now, of course, Jesus didn't physically reappear; he did not come back in the expected ways on the expected timeline. And so Luke also emphasizes the cosmic, general — indeed, universal — sense of Jesus' words. It starts with the temple in Jerusalem but then zooms out and becomes less time-bound.

This text was meant to be relevant for Christians living after the historical circumstances Jesus refers to. It seems that Luke's purpose in writing was, among other things, to give instructions for followers of Jesus, or followers of the "Way" as Luke calls it. This stands near the beginning of a long tradition of Christians interpreting and reinterpreting what Jesus' return, or the second coming, really means: is it physical nor nonphysical? Bodily or spiritual? In time or outside of time? Etc.

So, Luke intended to make Jesus' words here relevant for Christians living after the destruction of the temple. But: are they relevant for us now?

A way to get at that might be to ask another question: is our moment, our historical situation, unique?

It can feel like the world is ending. There is yet another COVID variant. There is deep political division and social unrest; climate change; wars and rumors of wars, etc.

And there certainly are ways in which the challenges we face now are unique and unprecedented. But, in other ways, these things always happen. Just think of 9/11, or the Cuban Missile Crisis, or World War II. There's a song by the band Wilco called "You Never Know," that goes, "Every generation think it's the worst, thinks it's the end of the world."

So: if that's the relevance, what's the message? Well, although this passage is commonly interpreted as Jesus talking about the end of the world, perhaps we might instead hear Jesus telling us that when it feels as though the world and your life has been turned upside down, God is on the other side. God will be there for us; is always there for us.

Perhaps Jesus is telling his disciples that, no matter what happens in our lives and in our world, new life and new beginnings are on the other side of all of our endings for those who trust in the Lord; for those who wait for God; for those who prepare room in their hearts for Christ to be born.

This passage, then, can be heard as a message of hope.

This Advent season, may we look for signs of new life like the fig tree sprouting leaves that Jesus spoke of; may we keep watch and stay awake; may we discover or deepen our trust that nothing — no amount of personal or collective trials and tribulations — is stronger or more real than God's love for us.