

Going the Distance

Isaiah 65:17-25

Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 21:5-19 November 13, 2016 26th Sunday after Pentecost

We're finally done with the political campaign, thank heavens. It seemed endless, mainly because of all the nastiness and name calling involved, at all levels. A cartoon in last Monday's PD was about a child's understanding of the political campaign. At first, it was a three ring circus. Then it became a dark puppet show, with a donkey and elephant smacking one another. Then it ended up like an endless car ride. Aren't we there yet?¹ We saw a woman out shopping on election day, and her sweatshirt said, "I hate political ads, and I approve of this message." Now the election is over, and we begin the process of transition of leadership. No matter which side you voted on, whether you're happy or anxious, please pray for our nation, that we can all work together for the common good.

The political campaign was just one slogging time in our lives. There have been others. People in the military—and I salute our veterans today—have told me that "hurry up and wait" was a common experience. Those who served in combat have talked about weeks of boredom punctuated by minutes of sheer terror. Many of us have experienced periods of anxiety from being unemployed or unemployed and wondering how to pay the bills. Many of us have known the anxiety of waiting for the results of medical tests. Some of us have been worn down by the nausea and weakness of chemo; others have been worn down by the heavy weight of depression. Sometimes ongoing conflicts in families can wear us to a frazzle. Sometimes our daily work can seem tedious for cubicle jockeys and arduous for physical laborers with little sense of reward or meaning, other than a paycheck. Slogging. The mud of life sucking at our shoes as we plod on. It wears down our bodies, it wears down our souls.

It's easier being a Christian, believing in God's loving presence in our lives, when we first hear the call, "Come, follow me," and drop our nets and run after the young Messiah. It's easier being a Christian when we see or experience great acts of healing. It's easier being a Christian when we find ourselves forgiven, and given a new start in life. It's easier being a Christian when we're caught up in the joy of a mountaintop experience, like the disciples had at the Transfiguration.

But then life happens. Conflict happens. Slogging happens.

For Jesus and the disciples, it was the walk to Jerusalem that we reflect upon during Lent. "No good deed goes unpunished," we think as we read the story of Jesus; how every healing bringing a challenge; every teaching

¹ Rhymes with Orange, Monday, November 07, 2016, St Louis Post Dispatch

bringing a twisted distortion; every act of forgiveness brings the cry of "Who is he to forgive sins?". It was one thing that the religious leaders thought he was a blasphemer and the political leaders thought he was a rabble rouser. But even his own disciples didn't understand why he was heading to Jerusalem. They couldn't accept the challenge of "Take up your cross and follow me." They argued about who would be greatest in God's Kingdom. They dug in their heels.

Now the out-of-town tourists had come to Jerusalem, and saw the panorama, maybe looking across the valley from the Mount of Olives, and they were impressed. Jerusalem's a beautiful city, gleaming on a hill. Strong walls and gates protected it. At the high point stood the temple, gleaming in the sunlight. Ironically, the temple had been remodeled and made more beautiful and majestic, just a few decades earlier by King Herod. *That* King Herod. The one who had slaughtered the innocents in an attempt to slaughter the baby Jesus. Herod wasn't Jewish, but he had the temple remodeled to establish his rule.

When the disciples saw the beautiful structure, the imposing edifice, they oohed and awed. This was the house of God they had heard about all their lives. The white marble, the steps, the pillars, the gold, filled their senses.

Then, on that sunny day, Jesus rained on their parade. He used a form of prophecy called apocalyptic, like Pat's class has been studying in the Book of Daniel. The Book of Revelation in the NT is the biggest book of this kind of preaching. When you hear the word Apocalypse you may think it refers to the end of the world, and sometimes it does, but not always. It does always refer to conflict, when evil forces rule supreme on earth and God's people are suffering. It uses highly symbolic language, almost like code language, which the suffering people can understand but the evil people in power can't. It predicts that God will one day have the upper hand, and will triumph over evil, and will restore God's people, either in this world or the next.

So, with that in mind, let's return to Jesus and the disciples, when the disciples were admiring the beauty of the temple and the city. They looked solid, like something that could last forever. But Jesus knew that, despite the outward beauty and strength of the temple and the city, it wouldn't last forever. Internal tensions in the nation, oppression from the top and anger from the bottom, would lead to an explosion; to chaos; to rebellion. The Romans would not allow rebellion to succeed. They would enforce the Peace of Rome with the power of marching legions. The city, the temple, would lie in ruins. It wouldn't be the end of the whole world, but it would be the end of the world they knew. "Not even one stone will be left upon another. All will be demolished." (21:6b)

The disciples asked when would this happen? What would be the signs of the times? Jesus warned them not to be fooled, either by false messiahs or fake predictions. Don't panic—when you panic, you make bad decisions. You jump to conclusions. Jesus said there would be wars and rumors of wars. I remember way back in my first pastorate, one of my church members would quote that line, and say that this must be the end times because there wars and rumors of wars. Friends, I've studied history, and there are almost always wars or rumors of wars. We forget that Jesus' next words were "don't be alarmed." Again, he was saying don't jump to conclusions. He goes on, though, to describe natural calamity, food shortages, and epidemics. He warned the disciples that they would be considered as enemies by the powers that be; that their own family members might betray them; that some would be executed. After all that grim stuff, he then said "Still, not a hair on your heads will be lost. By holding fast, you will gain your lives." (v18-19) Now that must have really confused the disciples. You'll be persecuted. You'll be hated. You'll be executed. But don't worry about it. Everything will be okay. Huh?

R. Allen Culpepper says, "The truth is paradoxical, but not contradictory. Both assertions are true, and the second is so true, it can sit alongside the first. The standard of success for Christians is endurance, so Jesus' last word in this section is "by your endurance you will gain your souls." (v. 19).²

Jesus was predicting bad things that would happen to his disciples, as well as to his nation, in their lifetime. It did happen. In the early 70s, rebellions grew. Chaos reigned. Then the Romans did their thing and crushed the rebellion, flattened the temple, and destroyed the city. Jesus knew that it was coming, and he didn't want the disciples to panic, to lose heart, to give in.

This is the message of all apocalyptic prophecy in the Bible. Things are tough. Your world may seem like it's falling apart, and it may be. Emperors may persecute you, or chaos and calamity may overwhelm you, but don't give up. Hang in there. God is still with you, and God will help you endure. In the long run, God will triumph and God's justice will make all things right. Ultimately, God will bring a new heaven and a new earth, where all the saints will sing God's praise. You don't need to know when; you can't know when, so don't even try to figure it out. Just hang in there. Endure. Stay faithful and true, in good times and in bad, and God will stay faithful and true, and hang in there with you. No matter how bad things might get, trust in God. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

²R. Allen Culpepper, "Pastoral Perspective Luke 21:9-19," *Feasting on the Gospels, Luke, Volume 2* Westminster John Knox Press, 2014, pp. 232, 234.