

November 13, 2022 – Luke 21:5-28 & 2 Thessalonians 3:1-13

Have you ever had one of those moments where a complete disaster occurs right in front of you and it's like you're watching it in slow motion. And you can't do anything about it, so you just stand back and marvel at how incredibly bad it's going to be. A complete train wreck, we sometimes call it.

I had one of those moments during my second year of seminary. Although it wasn't a train wreck. It was a car wreck. I was taking a class that required me to go into downtown St Louis with another classmate. And as we were driving back to campus one day, we reached an intersection with a traffic light.

It was a T-intersection, we could go straight through, while the road to our right ended and had to turn one way or the other. And although we had a green light, there was a car that had come in from the right that was stopped in the middle of the intersection, completely blocking both lanes of traffic.

We didn't know what was going on. We couldn't see the driver, but they had no hazard lights on and no one was getting out, which is what you would expect if the car had simply stalled in the middle of the intersection. So I did the typical, knee jerk reaction of a city-driver, and honked my horn.

Immediately the car lurched forward, jumped the curb, drove down the embankment, and slammed head on into a tree. It was spectacular. And horrible. And completely baffling. And it just... happened. Right there in front of us. And we couldn't do a thing about it. And, of course, we got out, called 911, and checked on the driver. Only to discover that she was in the middle of a seizure, which had caused her to lose control.

I think we've all had those moments to one degree or another. Those times in our lives when we watch something horrible happen right in front of us. And we have an emotional reaction to it. Panic or confusion or amazement or sadness or any number of different feelings. And we start to imagine... what if that had happened to me?

But we're also detached from it. We know that there was nothing we could do to stop it. We know that, whatever happens to the other person, we're OK. We weren't involved. We're connected to it by being a witness to it, and yet ultimately someone else has a much bigger problem on their hands. All we can do is give them our help.

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus describes for his disciples a train wreck situation like that. The train wreck of all train wrecks, so to speak. And though you can sense the emotion in his voice, you also get a sense of unusual calm and detachment from him about the whole thing.

He's just dropped a rather ominous statement: the magnificent temple of Jerusalem will one day crumble. And his disciples are rightly concerned. The last time the temple was torn stone from stone they ended up in Babylonian exile for 70 years. But what Jesus reveals to them is far worse than just an earthly exile.

He tells them that there will be deceivers and wars and revolutions! But don't be afraid. He tells them that there will be earthquakes and famines and disease! That the disciples will be tortured and imprisoned by the authorities! But don't worry. You'll know what to do.

He tells them that they'll be betrayed by their loved ones, hated by everyone, murdered and executed! But really, you'll be fine. He tells them that Jerusalem will be sacked, the Jews scattered! There will be suffering such that people would rather kill themselves than endure it! That even the sun, moon, and stars will be shaken from the sky and the entire planet will be in terror! But it's OK. It's just the end of the world.

It's almost comical the way that Jesus lays out the scene for them. Describing it as if he's watching it happen right before him. And he's obviously concerned about what will happen to his disciples. And yet, so oddly at peace with it as well.

Because, simply put, it will be a train wreck of a disaster. It is, for us, a train wreck of a disaster. This world around us is falling apart. It is a car that has slammed head on into a tree called sin. And there are wars and revolutions. There are earthquakes and famines and disease. There are leaders everywhere who torture, imprison, and execute Christians. The church around the world is very often hated, betrayed, and murdered.

And in one sense we are fully connected to it. We see it and feel it. It affects the way we live and work and where we go and what we do. For some of us, it may have even effected how we voted last week.

And, truth be told, we, ourselves, are sinners, who contribute to all the sinfulness around us. We fail to love God with our whole heart. We fail to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are neck deep in this cesspool of evil that we call a home.

And even when we haven't contributed to the sin around us, we're certainly not immune to its effects on us. We are not immune to the consequences of sin. We are not immune to pain and sadness and death. We're not immune to it any more than Jesus himself was, as he was beaten and tortured and spit upon and crucified. If Jesus, the perfect Son of God, was made to suffer at the hands of evil men, we, His sinful disciples, should expect nothing better.

And yet, we're also detached from it. Because just as we stand with Jesus in experiencing the effects of sin, we also stand with Jesus and look upon a world of sin and realize that we're no longer a part of it. We're strangers here. Foreigners. Aliens. Innocent bystanders to the greatest train wreck the world has ever known. It's end.

In the water of baptism, we have died with Christ and we have been raised with Him to new life. We are changed by that water. Separated from those around us who look to the future and see only destruction. We've already died. What can death do to us? We've already seen our Lord rise from the dead and ascend into heaven and sit at the right hand of the Father. We already know how this train wreck ends. And it doesn't include our destruction.

So we can wonder about the future. We can worry with dread about the pain of old age and the frustration of disability and the hardships of poverty and the sadness of death. That's OK. There is real suffering in this world. And we can't just bury our heads in the sand and pretend it's not there. That somehow just because we're Christians then sin and it's effects cease to exist.

Jesus didn't do that. He describes it in detail. He gives his disciples a complete picture of the mortal life that awaits them. St Paul does the same thing. In fact, he goes one step further. He tells us that not only should we be aware of the suffering of this world, but we should talk to God about it. We read just today: *"Pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men."* Don't hide from it. Don't sit in denial about it. Ask God to do something about it.

But at the same time, Paul doesn't succumb to despair any more than Jesus did. He doesn't let himself get sucked into a train wreck that he isn't a part of, and he encourages us not to as well. *"The Lord is faithful... He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one."* Yes, there are evil people around us and horrible things that happen. Yes, you will suffer because of them.

But the evil one cannot touch you. Satan cannot hurt you. Hell cannot devour you. You are set apart from these things as a child of God. Death has no more power over you than it did Jesus himself. So don't worry. God is faithful. Not a hair on your head will perish. Stand firm and you will gain life.

When the entire world is crashing down on your heads, don't cower in fear. Stand up and look to the sky. After all, it's just the end of this world. But it's not your end. Because you're not a part of this world. You're part of a better world. You're not a citizen of this fragile kingdom. You're a citizen of the kingdom of God. And while this world creeps ever closer to its end, your redemption is drawing near. Amen.