

When Your World Collapses

A Sermon for Every Sunday

Luke 21:5-19

What did you have for lunch on August 28, 1985? I can tell you what I had! I had two meatball sandwiches with extra marinara sauce! How do I know that? Well, that was the day that I became a ‘novice’ – that is, a ‘new member’ – of the monastery where I lived for four years.

A little background for you – all during high school and college, I had a sense that God may be calling me to some kind of ministry in the church. So I prayed, I listened, I learned. God and I did some wrestling. At times I stopped listening. But God was persistent. So after graduating from college in the spring of 1985, I decided to join a community of priests and brothers who lived not far from my childhood home. And I was formally welcomed into that community on August 28, 1985.

Now, When you’re welcomed into a community of monks, that new beginning gets symbolized in a special way. You are clothed in the habit of the Order – that is, the official garb that you wear. I’m sure that many of you have seen a picture of a Franciscan Friar walking around in a brown robe with a rope tied around his waist, or a Benedictine monk wearing a long black robe, perhaps with a hood over his head to stay warm.

Well, the community I joined wore an all-white habit. (Think of the all-white outfit that the pope wears, and you will have an idea of what we looked like). So there I was, wearing this all white outfit for the first time, and we went into the dining room to enjoy lunch. And what did they serve us as we wore this all-white outfit? That’s right – meatball sandwiches, with extra marinara sauce! Perhaps this was the first test of my calling? Could I eat the marinara sauce without getting stains on my clothing?

I loved being a monk. I loved gathering in the chapel four times a day to sing the psalms and hear the Word of God. I love gathering around the table of the Lord to celebrate the Eucharist. I was inspired by the ministries we undertook all over the metropolitan area. And I loved my brothers in the community. This abbey felt like home. I thanked God that I had found such a wonderful place to spend the rest of my life, serving Him.

For four years, I lived and loved and served in that community. I even learned how to eat without getting tomatoes on my habit! I thought everything was going along just fine. Then, one day, the priest in charge of the monastery called me into his office, and he said, “You’ll never be a priest. Because you don’t have what it takes.”

I sat straight up in my chair. Said a quick prayer. Thanked him for what he had told me. And walked out of his office.

And my world... collapsed around me.

I called my parents and asked if I could come home. So I packed my few belongings into a small bag, and left.

I was 26 years old, and it felt like my world had just fallen apart. I had been convinced that I was supposed to spend my whole life at that place, with those people. I was happy there. But it all fell apart. My dreams and plans crumbled. My hopes were pulled out from under me. I **THOUGHT** that God had brought me there to build the rest of my life in that place. It came crashing down in one afternoon.

30 years later, I am able to look back and see what God was up to. Having left the monastery, I had to throw myself on God's mercy in a new way. I had to learn how to listen in prayer like I had never listened before. Then the Lord put one person into my life, who helped me to meet another, who led me to someone else. And after a rough and tumble time of healing and listening and learning to trust again, God began to show me that he was building a new future for me. And the boy from Pennsylvania ended up serving the church in Virginia.

And you know what? Every day, I wake up, and I thank God. Because I know I am where God wants me today, and I cannot imagine doing anything else and being happy.

True, it was a very painful ending at the monastery. To a 26 year old, it felt like the end of my world. But Christ took that painful ending, and he led me to a new place, and a new hope, and a new life.

New dreams arise when old ones crumble.

You may notice that, during these last weeks of November, our Lectionary Scripture readings focus *endings* – the end of the world as we know it, the consummation of all creation, the end of time, the 2nd coming of the Lord.

In today's Gospel passage, Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. He envisions the end of the ritual sacrifice which happened there, the tumbling down of the **ONE THING** that the Jewish people could be certain of. If the temple were ever destroyed, it would feel like the end of the world for God's chosen people.

And not only that...according to Jesus, peaceful societies will crumble into violence, and comfortable cultures will unravel into famine. Family ties will come undone, relatives will hand over family members to the authorities, and people will be thrown into prison simply for being believers. Your peaceful world, Jesus says, is coming to an end.

Sobering stuff! You don't have to be a 26 year old monk to get nervous when the Lord starts talking about the crumbling down of everything you thought you could trust! Jesus doesn't hold back. He tells the truth, in vivid language.

The problem is that, in almost every century, someone has read this vivid Gospel language. Then they look at the world as they experience it. Then they stand up and says, “The end is happening now! This end that Jesus predicts is happening right now... or, at least, new week.”

In the past couple of years, haven't we heard pundits – liberal and conservative – who keep warning us that the end of civilization is just around the corner? Some tell us that global warming is going to destroy us. Others tell us that ‘Obamacare’ is going to destroy us. Some tell us that people of a different faith will destroy us. Others predict that sinners, or strangers, or scandals will destroy us. (I personally worry that shows such as *The Bachelor* or *The Jersey Shore* just might be the greatest threat to our survival!)

But seriously – we can have a serious problem with a passage such as this. And here's the problem: Jesus' description of the end of the world (and what will lead up to it) can be applied to *every* century of *every* era, if apply just enough pressure and creativity to the Gospel text.

After all, Jesus says that, just before the end, we will see wars, famines, earthquakes, and people of faith betrayed and persecuted. Well, those things have happened in every century since Jesus rose from the dead. And they are still happening. Sadly, I suspect they will continue to happen.

So, if we here a text like that and we focus a question such as: ‘when the end will come? When will it all come crumbling down?’ we may be missing the main point. I'm not sure that Jesus described the end of the world so that you and I can stockpile food, move to a bunker and live in fear.

When the Lord spoke these words, he knew what he was trying to convey. Inspired by the Spirit, we need to listen as best we can. And I am sure that a vivid Gospel passage like this one speaks to us of many truths, on many levels.

Today, let me focus on just one: I think that Jesus describes the end of the world in vivid language because, in every century, ordinary people have moments when they feel like **THEIR WORLD** is falling apart. And he wants to remind us that, through the mystery of *his* dying and rising, *we* will see a new beginning coming out of every painful ending. We can trust that painful endings can lead to a new and more abundant life.

In the past 12 months, I'll bet that everyone listening to this sermon has experienced some kind of painful ending. Some of your dreams have crumbled. Part of the world that you have built may feel like it's fallen apart. Some of your hopes get dashed. Something – or someone – you thought you could always count on, could always trust, has been taken away, has crumbled, leaving you breathless.

Jesus reminds us that the Christian approach to these painful endings is *trust* – trust that God can create something new out of the most desolate place.

Your spouse dies. Your child gets sick. Your marriage ends. Your job disappears. You fail the test. You struggle with addiction. You get into legal trouble. Someone told you that you don't have what it takes....

It feels like the temple in Jerusalem – your touchstone with God - is falling to the ground. It feels like your world is crumbling around you. Then God says: Every cross leads to Easter. Every passion leads to resurrection. Jesus died...then he rose. And you will too.

That's the center of our faith- not a building, but a belief that our relationship with the Risen One leads us from death to new life.

Believe it. Live it. Cling to it. Share it and show it to your friends, neighbors and even your enemies through your words and deeds.

Jesus once was dead...*but look at him now!*

—*Michael Renninger* © 2019