

Luke 21:5-19     The Temple and the Ginkgo Tree  
Isaiah 12; 65:17-25  
November 16, 2025

As I stood on the front steps of the church, just the week before last, and gazed upon the sky to the east, in full view was the brilliant yellow of the ginkgo tree across the street, set against the crisp Ohio sky. Even this Sunday past, though it wasn't a sunny day, it was still in the fullness of its autumnal beauty. In the presence of such a sight, it was hard to think of the troubles of the world. Tuesday morning there was not a leaf left upon it.

As we approach the end of the church year, which also means the beginning of a new church year; beginning in Advent in two weeks, we are called to contemplate that trouble, the troubled reality of the present age, beautiful and tragic. Not for the sake of it, of course, but for the sake of considering also our salvation and its meaning, and the meaning of our lives.

In the 21st chapter of the Gospel of Luke, we meet Jesus and his followers beholding, as I did the tree, the beauty of Herod's temple, and Jesus made them face their troubled world by telling of its destruction, not one stone left upon it. They asked him, "When? What are the signs?"

His answer has been read, at least part of it, and you get the idea, "Nation will rise up against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes,

famines, and pestilences, fearful events and great signs" . . . He goes on to speak of persecutions and imprisonments and family strife . . . all of which might seem helpful information except it has been a present reality, all of it, for the 2,000 years since Jesus spoke them, right up to the present time.

Our reading is only about half of the end times sermon in the Gospel of Luke. It is okay to refer to the other half. In the text beyond our reading Jesus continues, "the heavenly bodies will be shaken, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened . . . It won't be the end, we are told, "until we see the Son of man coming in a cloud with great power and great glory."

It is an idea that is challenged by the modern understanding of the way the world is put together. Some may consider this idea only believable for the superstitious of previous generations who did not know what we know. But the more I learn about the people of the biblical age, the less superstitious I believe they were, less than what it is popular to suppose; and my guess is that the present generation in its way is more impressionable and superstitious that we would like to admit.

But the ending of his end times sermon is an intriguing warning, as if his point has nothing to do with anything associated with the end. What he says is; "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation (which is the wasting of life like the prodigal),

drunkenness, and the anxieties of life, and that day will come upon you unexpectedly, like a trap.”

Could it be that the whole point of the eschatological message of the bible is to give the assurance that in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, everything will be okay? And when we accept Christ we accept that assurance, the primary result being *less anxiety about everyday life, the present times*. If that is the case, then these passages have been misunderstood, because they have been interpreted in ways that raise, instead of lower, the anxiety level.

The bible’s message begins with Creation, it literally begins, “In the beginning . . .” And it ends with, “come, Lord Jesus.” Before Advent, it is our task to consider the meaning of that invitation. In-between is the history of the world, and our own histories.

Part of that history is coming to the place in our lives and in our thinking and feeling and acting, where accepting the grace of God is not some begrudging chore, but the desire of our heart, the very thing we most want, so that there is no need for carrots or sticks, rewards or punishments, warnings about anticipatory signs.

*And . . .* the first sign that in the journey from whatever we want to call it; unbelief, sin, rebellion, antipathy or just apathy towards divine things . . . to faith, to the place where we can say in some way that to love the Lord God with our whole being is our primary concern, looks something like the 12th chapter of Isaiah, an

exclamation of praise, and of gratitude, even if the circumstances are dire, as they were for Israel in the time of Isaiah when the Assyrians had made them vassals and the Babylonians were on the way.

The continued subjugation of the nation of Israel, the opening up and spreading out of the Jewish diaspora, which presently has reached all over the world, and the at best modest, but more often diminished position of influence of its descendants, has led to the expansion of theological thought from the specific to the general. That is, from reflections about the nation and people of Israel in particular, to reflections about the entire human race in general.

So far as I know only the Jewish people of the post-exilic period achieved high theological thought such as we find in the Bible. The Christian faith has its foundation in the faith of Israel. We, ourselves, have identified with Abrahamic faith and its traditions. We recognize our story in the that of the Patriarchs and of the sojourn into Egypt, the Exodus, the monarchy under David and Solomon.

The sacred story continues with the decline and fall of the civilization, the exile, the formation of early Judaism, and mostly, of course, in Jesus, his band of followers, of which we are modern day counterparts; and his teaching and the spiritual traditions associated with his movement, and mainly, the crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and expected return. As the liturgical year draws to a close and we re-dedicate ourselves to faith in Jesus, we hear the words of the

65th chapter of Isaiah and its vision of a new heaven and earth, of a just and peaceful society, characterized by love of neighbor and abundance.

The promises of God compel from us a new commitment, an affirmation of faith that begins with an exclamation of praise and gratitude, and leads to a devotion to goodness, and all its implications:

mercy and compassion, friendship and generosity, honesty and integrity, kindness and courage, and the like; to obedient faith and hope, in the presence of whatever doubt and despair we face and to which we are tempted to submit.

The text from Luke envisions both that about which we are anxious; and as well the magnificent culmination of the return of Christ from heaven, descending on a cloud.

Turns out the Ginkgo is an interesting tree. Native to the Far East, it is considered sacred in some religious traditions, because of its resilience. It is one of the oldest tree species in the world, believed to have been around as a species for about 200 million years, if one can imagine it. That means it survived whatever event led to the extinction of the dinosaurs.

It also survived the atomic bomb. It was among a few species of tree that came back in the following spring in both Hiroshima and Nagasaki, though estimates were that in such an event no life would be possible for 75 years. There is even a consortium of mayors

that are a part of a program to take seedlings from the actual Ginkgos that survived the blast, and plant them in cities around the world.

It wasn't sacred in Israel or early Judaism, but that may only be because it was not native to that part of the world at the time. I am going to guess the one across the street will bloom in the spring, symbolizing life from death, eternal spring, even Christ's return., the raising cup of the temple of the human heart where Jesus resides.

So let us be encouraged once more, by the annual display of life turning into death and then into life again all around us, and dedicate ourselves once to this new birth, to the mandate of love and goodness that lies at the foundation of our lives.

There is no better way to conclude worship on this beautiful day, than to sing it, sometimes these things must be sung, *Lo He Comes on Clouds Descending*, sung to the tune of, *Angels We Have Heard on High*, both anticipating the season of Christ's birth, and the glorious return.

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