

Living In Apocalyptic Times  
Luke 21:25-36; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

In his poem "Second Coming," William Butler Yeats said, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned; the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

Prophetic words! Though written nearly a hundred year ago, they sound as if they were snatched from the latest of our headlines. "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." A month ago, a Russian airliner fell from the sky like a meteor killing all 224 people onboard – the victim of a terrorist bombing. Two weeks ago, terrorists launched a killing spree in Paris leaving 130 dead and numerous others wounded. Last week, terrorists seized a hotel in the African nation of Mali killing 27 people before the rest were freed. Indeed, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world!

One gets the impression we are living in apocalyptic times – dangerous times – frightening times – foreboding times – times that presage worse times to come. How are we to live in times like these?

In the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of Luke's gospel, Jesus predicted apocalyptic times and told his disciples how to live through them. In Luke 21:5-6, Jesus predicted the Temple's destruction. "The days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down," he said. Surprised by this prediction, the disciples asked, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" (Lk. 21:7) Or as Matthew puts it, "...the disciples came to him privately, saying, 'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?'" (Mt. 24:3)

Jesus answered their question by predicting the apocalyptic conditions they would encounter shortly after Jesus' crucifixion. "They will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons...You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death" he said. (Lk. 21:12, 16)

Jesus went on from there to predict the apocalyptic conditions they would encounter with the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. "When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies," he said, "then know that its desolation has come near...there will be great distress on the earth and wrath against this people; they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled by the Gentiles." (Lk. 21:20, 23-24)

Finally, Jesus predicted even worse apocalyptic conditions just prior to his Second Coming at the end of time. "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars," he said, "and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world,

for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory." (Lk. 21:25-27)

Do you see what Jesus did? He predicted apocalyptic conditions in the apostle's time and apocalyptic conditions at the end of time because there are apocalyptic conditions in every time! Let me repeat that. Jesus predicted apocalyptic conditions in the apostle's time and apocalyptic conditions at the end of time because there are apocalyptic conditions in every time! Will they be worse just prior to his Second Coming? Yes. Are they bad in every age? Indeed!

And some of you are going through your own private apocalypse right now. You've been diagnosed with an incurable disease. You've lost a loved one to some sad sickness or some tragic accident. Your marriage is in crisis. Your children have gone astray. You feel overwhelmed with the demands of life. You're on the verge of fainting with fear and foreboding in the midst of a private apocalypse.

Indeed, things fall apart; the centre cannot hold! How are we to live in times like these? Jesus gives an answer. When others are backing up, shutting up, letting up, or giving up, Jesus tells us to stand up, look up, pray up, and act up.

"Now when these things begin to take place," Jesus says in Luke 21:28, "...stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Apocalyptic times are not times to lie down in fear; they're times to stand up in faith. "Stand up!" Jesus says. What does that mean? Well among other things it means we must take a stand. When all about are giving way, we should stand firm in our faith.

In 1 Corinthians 15:58, Paul says, "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." In 1 Corinthians 16:13 Paul says, "Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong." And in Ephesians 6:13 he says, "...take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm." Indeed, when all about are giving way, we should stand firm in our faith.

The admonition to stand up or stand firm reminds me of an incident that occurred during the First Battle of Bull Run. If you're familiar with the battle then you know that Confederate forces were hard pressed at one point and their line broke under the weight of the Union attack. Troops under Confederate General Bernard Bee began to flee before the Union forces. Passing over Henry House Hill, Bee saw Virginia troops under Brigadier General Thomas Jackson holding firm before the assault. Seeking to rally his men, Bee said, "Look men! There is Jackson, standing like a stone wall... Rally behind the Virginians!" The Confederates rallied, stood, and conquered!

The first thing we must do in apocalyptic times is this: we must stand up! Apocalyptic times are not times to lie down in fear; they're times to stand up in faith. Remember, when all about are giving way, you should stand firm in your faith!

So we must stand up! And we must look up! In Luke 21:28 Jesus said, "...when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." My friend, when Bee's troops were in retreat, he told them to look up to Jackson and rally to the Virginians. They needed to take their eyes off their foes and look instead to their friends!

And sometimes our hearts give way because we look out instead of up! We look out at our foes instead of up to our Friend. We look at our circumstances instead of our Savior, at our pains instead of our Protector, at our troubles instead of at our triumphant Lord. So Jesus tells us that we must look up. We must lift our heads because our redemption is drawing near!

My friend, don't look down; look up! Your redemption is drawing near! Christ may break into your personal apocalypse at any moment with help and healing in his hands. And he'll certainly come at the end of the age to set everything in order!

Look up! That's what Jesus did when facing his own apocalypse at Calvary. Rather than looking out at the cross, he looked up at the crown! He looked up to the joy of his resurrection, the ecstasy of his ascension, and the happiness of his heaven. And by doing that, he found strength to endure the cruel crucifixion. So Hebrews 12:1-2 says: "...let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." (KJV)

Yes, Jesus looked up to the joy that was set before him and we need to do the same! We need to look up above the vicissitudes of life to the promises of God. Yes, our redemption is drawing near! My friend, Christ may break into your personal apocalypse at any moment with help and healing in his hands. And he'll certainly come at the end of the age to set everything in order!

So we need to stand up, look up, and then we need to pray up! In apocalyptic times – dangerous times – frightening times – foreboding times – times that presage worse times to come – we need to pray for strength to stand up and courage to look up to see our Savior coming – coming now to help us and coming finally to redeem us! In Luke 21:36, Jesus said, "Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." Here, Jesus connects prayer with receiving strength to stand.

Yes, we need to pray up. Prayer is the conduit through which God's power enters our lives giving us God's strength. What did Jesus do when facing the apocalypse of crucifixion? He prayed! In the very next chapter of Luke's gospel, we read these words: "Jesus...went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he said to them, 'Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.' Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt

down, and prayed...Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength." (Lk. 22:39-41, 43)

Jesus prayed and he was strengthened. After praying, Jesus returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. And what did he say? He said, "Get up and pray up!" "Get up," he said, "and pray that you may not come into the time of trial." (Lk. 21:46) Yes, we need to pray for strength, for hope, for help, for healing in these apocalyptic times!

Finally, in addition to standing up, looking up, and praying up, we need to act up in apocalyptic times! When others are acting out, we need to act up in ways that reflect our highest and holiest ambitions instead of our lowest and basest of passions! Paul tells us how we should act in the epistle reading – 1 Thessalonians 3:12-13. "May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all," Paul writes, "just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints." There it is. In anticipation of Jesus' Second Coming, Paul wants us to act up in love and holy living. When the world is acting out in violence and vileness, he wants us to act up in holiness and love.

So this is how we should live in apocalyptic times. We should stand up, look up, pray up, and act up! If we live like that then we will shine in the midst of these dark times. We'll bring light to our own lives and to this darkening world.

Not long ago I went for an early morning run around the Yard. It was dark when I set out but by the time I rounded the corner on Hospital Point I was met with crimson clouds colored scarlet by the light of a sun still hiding beneath the horizon but set to make an appearance at any moment. You see, the sun was coming but not yet up and the clouds were already reflecting its approaching glory.

A few minutes later, as I rounded another corner on Hospital Point the Naval Academy cemetery came into view and there, on one of its terraces, I saw a tombstone glowing with a warm and inviting light. At first I thought someone had placed a memorial candle near its base but then I realized that it was just reflecting the light of the rising sun. Remarkably, it was the only one to do so. All the other tombstones were shrouded in dark shadows. But not this grave marker. It was standing at just the right height and looking in just the right direction to catch and reflect light from the rising sun so that it and it alone, was bright with light among the other blue-gray tombstones.

And that's just the way we should be. We should stand up, and look up, and pray up, so we can act up, reflecting the light of the Risen Son on a world of darkness, doom, despair, and death.

My friend, are you passing through your own private apocalypse? Are these difficult times – dangerous times – frightening times – foreboding times – times that presage worse times to come. Then stand up! Don't lie down in fear; stand up in faith. Then

look up! Take your eyes off your foes and look up to your Friend! For your redemption is drawing near. Then pray up! Ask God for strength and courage, help and hope, and he will surely give it. Finally, act up! Live a holy life of love and you'll bring light to your own life and to this darkening world. If you do all of that, then you'll be able to face your own private apocalypse and you'll be ready to face Jesus when he comes again! And finally, contrary to William Butler Yates, you'll be able to say with confidence, "Things fall apart but the Centre still holds!" Amen.