

WPC  
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Knowing the End of the Story  
Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19

Human beings are not very good at reading the signs.

One of my favorite cartoonists is Gary Larson, a native of Washington State who wrote the “Far Side” cartoons. I think this is one of his funniest cartoons [SHOW CARTOON ON PROJECTOR, where a nerdy-looking boy is trying to enter the Midvale School for the Gifted. He’s carrying a book under one arm and leaning with his other arm, with all his weight, against the door, straining, trying to push open the door. On the door there’s a sign in great big letters that explains his problem. It reads, “PULL.”]

That’s us. We’re not very good at reading signs. And neither were the people that Jesus dealt with. All throughout the Gospels, people are coming up to Jesus and asking for a sign from heaven. Jesus performs one sign or wonder or healing, but then the people just ask for another sign.

Seemingly everybody who meets Jesus in the Gospels wants some sign, but when they get one they still don’t seem to be able to read the meaning for the signs. They’re pushing at a door that says, “Pull.” At one point earlier in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus throws up his hands in exasperation and

says, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It’s going to rain’; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?” (Luke 12:54-56).

We’re not too good at reading the signs; at least, not the signs that matter.

Neither are the disciples in our Gospel story. When Jesus tells them, “The days are coming when this magnificent temple is going to be nothing more than a pile of rubble,” the shocked disciples ask, “Teacher, when will this be? What will be the sign that this will take place?” And Jesus then starts talking about what will happen in the end time.

In the American Protestant church, there’s been a reluctance to preach on eschatology – the end time, the “last things.” I admit I’ve been guilty of not spending a lot of time engaging with texts that deal with the “second coming” or “judgment day.” It’s more natural for me to preach on God’s grace, or the hope we have because of the resurrection, or our call to put our faith into action through mission. But as I’ve mentioned before, this year I’m using the Revised Common Lectionary for preaching, which means that the texts have been chosen for me, and today, the assigned texts are all

decidedly eschatological. They all deal with the end time. And that's good, because to ignore eschatology is to ignore a major theme in the Bible.

In today's Gospel, it's not only that Jesus warns against speculating on the date and time when history will come to an end, he also gives instruction on how to live in the meantime. As William Willimon says, "We're to live as those who, knowing something about the end of history, live in a certain way in the present."<sup>1</sup> This will not always be easy, and we don't know exactly what the future holds, but we can live with confidence in the present because we know that God holds the future.

It's a bit like watching a game on a DVR when you already know the final score. I always resisted doing this in the past because I always liked to watch games live. But nowadays, I don't have as much time as I used to have to watch many games live, and, I have to admit, skipping the endless commercials makes the experience much more pleasant. If I happen to hear the final score before I watch the game, and I know that my team has won, it's a much different experience than watching the game live. I can still get caught up in the ups and downs of the game, still get excited by certain plays and groan at others, but I know that the final results have been determined.

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<sup>1</sup> William Willimon,, Pulpit Resource, Nov. 14, 2010, p. 30.

In the same way, we can live with confidence in the present because we know that God holds the future.

When most of us think about the future, the world has taught us to think in terms of human progress. When I was a boy, I couldn't wait until the magical year 2000, because in a number of movies and books the future always meant human progress that would eventually solve all problems. We looked forward to Utopia, a time when there would be no more poverty, crime, or disease, and the only thing we'd have to worry about would be how fast our flying cars could go.

However, the more pessimistic among us have doubted that we're making any progress at all. Instead of Utopia, we're headed for its opposite, Dystopia. Tomorrow will be bleaker than today because there are big problems that humanity won't be able to solve. If you've read *1984* or seen the movies "Soylent Green" or "Blade Runner," you know what I mean.

Willimon notes that both of these approaches – the future is rosy and bright, and the future is bleak and dreary – assume that it's all up to us. We're the main actors of history. In our hands has been given the future and what we make of the future is up to us. But the scriptures take a very different view. They tell us that the future is not wholly dependent upon us for its ultimate fate but that it is left up, finally, at the end, to God. This

means that we can live and act in this world because we have a vision that gives us hope for the future.

Tom Long puts it this way: the Bavarian village of Dachau became the site of an infamous Nazi concentration camp. In the museum at the site of the camp there are photographs – of the reign of death and despair in Dachau and the other camps. One of these photographs shows a little girl, she must be about seven or eight, and her mother, being marched to the gas chamber at Auschwitz. The mother walks behind her daughter, powerless. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, she can do to stop what is about to happen. So, she commits the only act of love left to her; she places her hand over her daughter's eyes so the girl will not see where they are going, so that the horror that is about to befall them is not the last thing her little daughter will see.

Long says that he believes that every person who gazes at that photograph is moved to the prayer: “God, do not let this be the last word.”

In light of today's scripture, we can declare that even that kind of horror does not hold the last word.

To be honest, the wars, the violence, the suffering that humanity has gone through in the past and is going through at present are indeed terrible. God too, suffers with us. The powers and principalities hold terrible power

in human history. But they don't have *ultimate* power. They can't control Jesus. They threw everything but the kitchen sink at Jesus on the cross, and ended up killing him. That was the worst they could do to him. Yet God's love proved to be stronger still, even over death.

So, Jesus tells us, don't be fooled by the endless cycles of violence in our world. Yes, we continue to struggle against them. But we know how the story ends, and that makes all the difference in the world. Amen.