

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost  
November 17, 2019  
Ms. Mary Hinkle  
Church of the Holy Cross, Dunn Loring Va.

Isaiah 65:17-25  
Canticle 9 (Is. 12:2-6)  
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13  
Luke 21:5-19

### **The Time Is Near? The Time Is Now.**

Wars and insurrections. Nation against nation, kingdom against kingdom. Great earthquakes. Famines. Plagues. Dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

The law that's helping fuel Delhi's deadly air pollution.<sup>1</sup>

Vast brush fires rip across Australia.<sup>2</sup>

The battle against one of the worst Ebola epidemics ever is in trouble.<sup>3</sup>

Civilians rush to escape Turkish airstrikes in northern Syria.<sup>4</sup>

There have been more mass shootings than days this year.<sup>5</sup>

Day of rage, violence in Hong Kong.<sup>6</sup>

It can be hard to tell today's headlines from Jesus' words to his followers, can't it? We see him in this passage in prophet mode, warning of trials to come, signs of the end of the world. Oh, and the disciples will face personal persecution beforehand, Jesus adds, as if it were an afterthought. Almost forgot to mention the betrayals, hatred, and possible executions.

We find ourselves in times that give us empathy, I hope, for the disciples. Wars, genocide, slaughtered civilians, detention camps, refugees, untreatable diseases, catastrophic weather, rising seas. And yes, personal attacks on us and others because of what we do or don't believe, to the point that families are divided and friendships broken. It's no wonder that, just as Jesus prophesied, there are people in the streets crying out, "The time is near."

But if we allow ourselves to despair, we're missing Jesus' point. He doesn't give this warning to his disciples so that they will give up, disband, fall away, return to their old lives. This is a message of hope. This is good news indeed. We may need to remind ourselves of this by rereading the end of the passage: "Not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

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<sup>1</sup> [www.vox.com/science-and-health](http://www.vox.com/science-and-health), November 13, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Washington Post, November 10, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> New York Times, March 7, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> CBS News, October 10, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> CBS News, August 4, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Washington Post, November 12, 2019.

What does Jesus mean by endurance? I think he clearly means faith, faith that hangs on through all the trials he has predicted. But also active endurance, to keep doing what Jesus has taught his disciples to do, the things he's just mentioned: stand up for his name, testify publicly, take in the wisdom that he will send. Or, in the words of the letter to the Thessalonians, "do not be weary in doing what is right."

And what does Jesus mean by "gain your souls"? He doesn't make an explicit reference, but we know that he is intimately familiar with the prophecies of Isaiah. And the lectionary groups these lessons for a reason: because after the end of the world will come a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth. The prophecies align almost point by point: Wars and insurrections? Isaiah says, "No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress." Earthquakes and natural disasters? Isaiah says, "They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit." Famines and plagues? Isaiah says, "No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime."

Isaiah gives us a vision of the world of peace, unity, and beauty that will be God's new creation; a new Jerusalem that will be a joy and delight; the eternal home for all those who, by their faith and endurance, save their souls.

But we still live in this very troubled world, and all of the problems that we started with still confront us. So what are we to do? When "there is so much wrong going on outside,"<sup>7</sup> what are we to do here on the inside? Inside our parish, our community, our larger church? What "right" things are we to do without growing weary?

There are three parts to my answer to that question. I'm going to talk about them in an order that seems logical to me, moving outward in concentric circles, but in reality, we don't do these things in separate or discrete steps—they are more like a spiral, or overlapping circles in a Venn diagram; we do them more or less simultaneously, and they swirl around, one influencing another.

First, we focus our attention inside our congregation. We take care of each other. We are called to be Christ's hands and feet on earth, and so we should emulate Christ in providing comfort and relief to others' physical, spiritual, and emotional needs. And that begins here, within our parish family, as well as in our own homes. Now, obviously, we're already doing this, but we face challenges that make it more important than ever that we pay attention to caring for one another. On top of all the wrong going on, we're in the middle of a clergy transition that I'm sure makes at least some of us uneasy at best. Change is always difficult, because it involves loss as well as potential gain, so I urge all of you to be patient with yourselves and your parish brothers and sisters. A good place to start: in few minutes we'll share the peace; be mindful that what you are doing is not a social greeting, but a fervent prayer for good things for those you greet.

Second, we ensure that our doors are open to all comers, that our welcome is warm and sincere, that our hospitality is as radical as Jesus' openness to all whom he encountered. We must treat all people who come here as if they were Jesus himself. We must be sure that anyone who walks in feels embraced, not ignored, no matter how they look or speak or act. We can invite friends, especially those we know are unchurched, to come to a service or another event here. We can talk about the love and peace we find here. How many of us, when a coworker asks tomorrow

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<sup>7</sup> Pink, "Walk Me Home," Hurts 2B Human, February 20, 2019.

morning, “How was your weekend?” will mention this service? How many will invite Thanksgiving or Christmas guests to come to church?

Third, we go out into the world, leaving behind the walls of our church, to do the acts of love that Jesus taught his disciples. We enlarge our community, expanding the circle to include all of our neighbors, near and far. We share from our abundance, helping to feed and clothe the needy close at hand and farther away. We help poor families buy Christmas gifts for their children. We give aid to the homeless. We carry Christ’s message of love and hope to those we encounter, and we send it across the globe to those we cannot reach in person, offering assistance to victims of natural disasters and porridge to schoolchildren in Africa.

We do all of these things in love and joy. We persevere, and when we grow weary, we circle back to the beginning and buck each other up. We cannot know whether the time is near; Isaiah’s vision will be fulfilled only in God’s time, a plan forever hidden from us. But we do know that the time is now for us to do what we can to make this world as close to that new world as possible.

Next Sunday is the last in our church year; on December 1 our calendar starts anew with Advent. All the more reason, I think, to say the time is now, to renew our resolve to live as faithful followers of Jesus, to make God’s deeds known by our actions in God’s name, to do what is right, to endure.

Amen.