

March 17th: Rise

This Fall we returned to the Narrative Lectionary—a year long collection of readings that take us from the origins of God’s people to the first century world. These readings are chosen on purpose, because they help us trace a particular theme throughout our scripture texts—and this year our theme is “Love in Action.” In each of these passages, there’s a compelling action that is embedded into the narrative, that I want us to be paying attention to and practicing this week. Of course, we know that love is the most important verb of all, so we’ll also be tracing how God’s love was shown to our spiritual ancestors and discover how God’s love is still being shown to us today.

As we study together, I want to remind us that the goal isn’t simply to increase our knowledge of God—the goal is to increase in love towards God and towards each other. The goal is to increase our love in action, this week and every week, so that our world can more and reflect God’s enduring love for all of creation.

Let’s pray and seek God’s wisdom together this morning.

Transformative God, you break into the mess and chaos of our world to bring restoration and peace. You came to us, your broken and lost people, with a message of hope—and today we yearn for his good news to fill our souls. We long for the kingdom that you have promised us, we await the day when all of the injustice and despair of our world is wiped away. Today we commit this time of reflection and preparation to this vision for a better future, that we might be empowered to claim it for ourselves and carry it out as your disciples. Amen.

How many of you can remember the absolute panic that gripped the entire country in the months and weeks leading up to the year 2000? I was nine years old at the time, and not all that in tune with world events, but even I picked up on the growing hysteria that was embedded in our news, our social discourse, and our overall culture. Y2K was a phenomenon, and as New Year’s Eve got closer and closer, it felt like we were being pulled into one big, collective countdown. And as we gathered to ring in not just a new year or a

new decade or a new century, but a whole new millennium, we faced all of the fears that had been swirling through our minds. Adults that normally had a firm grasp on their lives were lost in the sea of anxiety and questions. Kids who didn't really understand what was happening just knew that something big was shifting. All of us were on edge.

We wondered: would the clocks stop? Would the computers suddenly break down? Would all electronics cease to work? Would entire industries crumble? Would people lose their jobs? What would happen to the economy? What would happen to all the plans we were making for the future? What would happen to humanity? Was this the apocalypse? Was the world doomed?

It got a little out of hand, and we got just a little bit dramatic about it all, but I think some of that concern was natural. Something like this had never happened before in our lifetimes, and it felt scary. It was unknown. It was uncertain. And in some ways, it felt like just the beginning.

Over the past few decades, it feels like we have lived through a never ending stream of these kinds of events. After Y2K, it was 9/11, then the "War on Terror," then the economic recession of 2008. Throw in some extra wars, a few genocides, devastating hurricanes and other natural disasters, and a multi-year pandemic for good measure, and you've got a very full calendar. Honestly I'm a little surprised that we're all still alive after this collective trauma, because all of this chaos has been deeply disruptive to our bodies, our minds, and our souls. During the past few years, my friends and I have joked that we are tired of living in unprecedented times—we are burned out from living through crisis after crisis. Maybe you feel the same way about the past few years, or even the past few decades.

It just feels like a lot, doesn't it? It feels heavy. It feels exhausting. It feels paralyzing some days. It can feel like constant anxiety and uncertainty. It can feel like the ground beneath you is shifting and unsafe. It can feel like there's nothing to hold onto.

And so you might be surprised to hear that Jesus is speaking into a somewhat similar context—his audience might be experiencing the same stress and

fatigues that we are. You see, the Jews of the first century world lived under the authority of the Roman Empire—they were an occupied people, at the mercy of a system and institutions that were always concerned with their welfare. And their recent history has been a series of conflicts—with various rebellions, power struggles between political and social groups, and foreign invasions. In just a few decades, they’ve seen leaders rise and fall, they’ve seen factions gain influence and then be taken down, they’ve seen kingdoms grow and shrink through constant warfare. They’ve seen their land be bought and sold and then taken over.

And so they might be on edge too. They might feel the weight of this oppressive situation. They might be exhausted by the turmoil. They might be longing for some semblance of normality and stability, just like we are. They might be just like us—burnt out, and looking for peace.

With that in mind, let’s take a closer look at our text.

Today is Fifth Sunday of Lent—so we are rapidly approaching the end of this liturgical season and the events of Jesus’ betrayal and death. As I was picturing this story this past week, as I was imagining what it must have been like for Jesus in the last week of his life, I had this visual of a countdown that kept playing in my mind. Like with Y2K, the clock is ticking, the anticipation is rising. The atmosphere of the city of Jerusalem is increasingly tense, we get this picture of Jesus making all of the final preparations for his impending trauma and sacrifice. And Jesus himself is feeling this heaviness. He’s feeling the full weight of what he’s about to go through. He’s feeling the intensity of this celebration, but it’s in contrast to the intensity of his coming execution.

At the beginning of chapter 13, Jesus is still with his disciples in the city center, near the temple complex. If you’ve ever been to Jerusalem, or seen pictures of sites like the Wailing Wall, you know that this part of the city was built from huge stones—like boulders, cut from giant slabs and then carefully placed, by hand, into strong configurations that have survived to this day. If you stand next to these walls, you might see that some of these stones are taller than an adult human being, and their scale must have been even more impressive to

people who lived without electricity, or excavating equipment, or crane machines.

Our gospel author writes that one of the disciples says, “Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!” But instead of validating the man’s statement, Jesus responds to this observation with a confusing prophecy. He says, “Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”

Jesus’ words might unsettle us, especially because this seems like a violent thing to say. We might wonder: why would Jesus want the temple to be thrown down? Why would Jesus claim that this holy place, which took hundreds of years to build, and rebuild, and reconstruct, would be destroyed while it was still used by thousands of people? Why would this solid, stable refuge for Jewish people be torn apart? And if that did happen, how could they exist in a world of constant chaos without this connection to God? How could they navigate the world without the reassuring presence of the temple?

But Jesus isn’t done with his dire predictions just yet. He continues, “Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.”

I don’t know about you, but to my tired and discouraged soul, this doesn’t sound like great news. It doesn’t even sound like good news. It sounds like more chaos, and more struggle, and more disruption, and more exhaustion. It probably doesn’t sound like good news for the disciples either—who are now having to worry about nations rising against nations, and famines, and earthquakes—all while trying to live in this constant state of uncertainty while death looms overhead. Jesus says, “Do not be alarmed,” but how could that be possible when the world is on fire and people are suffering? How could the disciples not be afraid, when Jesus tells them to be on guard, and that they will

be arrested and put on trial? How could they not be fearful when Jesus has promised that they will be beaten and handed over to the local councils?

I want to ask Jesus the same question, in the face of all the uncertainty and violence that we are facing now. How could we not be alarmed when it feels like one crisis after another saps our strength? How could we possibly remain calm when we are distracted by an endless stream of disasters? I really would like an answer, because it seems like our world is falling apart day by day and it's simply too much for any of us to handle.

But here's what I think Jesus is trying to tell us, which actually is good news.

Jesus didn't come to save systems or cities or stones—he came to save people. He came to bring a new kingdom, but that kingdom won't look like the kingdoms that we're used to—it's not a kingdom of temples, or altars, or sacrifices—it's a community that brings healing and restoration. It's new relationships that bring hope and liberation. It's service that brings dignity and value to others. It's action that brings love to every corner of our world.

And because God's kingdom has nothing to do with the structures that we've created, it doesn't matter if they break. It doesn't matter if the temple is torn apart, brick by brick.

The world might fall down, but God's kingdom rises up. The buildings that we've built might crumble, but God's kingdom rises up. The institutions that we've created might be destroyed, but God's kingdom rises up. The stock market might drop, but God's kingdom rises up. The leadership of nations might fracture or disappoint us, but God's kingdom rises up. The disciples might have been afraid, but God's kingdom rises up in them. We might feel ourselves weighed down by the heaviness of our daily lives, but God's kingdom rises up in us and through us.

God's kingdom rises up in and through you.

All of us are part of the rising. You are part of the rising.

You can bring hope. You can bring healing. You can bring liberation. You can bring care. You can bring dignity. You can bring love.

I know that it can be tough to believe this right now, but this morning, I want you to sit here in the peace of the sanctuary, I want you to soak up God's presence, and I invite you to trust that there is rising among us that we might not yet be able to see.

If we lose sight of this, we might get easily discouraged by the setbacks and stress that we experience in our weeks. If we lose sight of this, we might start to give into this culture of fear and despair that paralyzes us. If we lose sight of this, we might grow apathetic about the state of our community, or be convinced that there's nothing we can do to change things when another crisis hits. If we lose sight of this, we might be complacent about our future, or only focused on ourselves. If we lose sight of this, we might get buffeted about by the winds of social unrest, and knocked off course. If we lose sight of this, we might get so distracted by all the bad in our world that we can no longer see the good that is growing.

So I don't want you to forget: Even in the midst of what feels like chaos, God's kingdom rises up in us and through us. God's kingdom rises up in and through you.

I'll end with this final thought.

My friend Ellie is an artist, and she created a piece for me that hangs in my bathroom. Every morning, I look at the quote that she chose to write into the image, and most days, it gives me a little nudge of courage. Today, I want to pass it along to you—in the hopes that it gives you courage too, in the face of whatever disruption or obstacles are present in your life.

The writer William C. Hannan wrote, "The day will be what you make it, so rise like the sun, and burn."

Rise like the sun and burn, my friends. Amen.