

# THE TIME IS NEAR!

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**LUKE 21:5-19**

**LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH**

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**NOVEMBER 17, 2013/26<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

We have been on a journey with Jesus through the gospel of Luke this fall. We have made a few exceptions here and there, but most of our worship services have been centered around listening and learning from Jesus on *his* journey to Jerusalem.

And we have been listening and learning for *our* journeys all these years later in a time and a place that is very different than his in many ways.

In our text today, Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem. He has reached his journey's physical destination and the events that unfold from here will reveal the goal of his destination.

But what happens in Jerusalem will not be what anyone expected.

There was a very clear set of expectations regarding what would happen when Israel's Messiah would come to Jerusalem, but Jesus, as we know, will be taking a much different path.

Things will not go as planned for those who expect a triumphant king to take up residence in the city of God, as we will see in our text today.

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Let's set the scene: we're near the end of the gospel of Luke but right in the middle of the bigger story Luke is telling. Luke-Acts is actually one large book by the same author and it tells the story of Jesus and the rise of the early church.

Jesus' public ministry of healing and teaching and announcing the kingdom of God is mostly finished.

Throughout his ministry he has repeatedly emphasized that what he is accomplishing must be done in Jerusalem. This is where the climax of the story will come.

In Luke 9:51, Jesus is described as “setting his face to Jerusalem.” Jerusalem is the center of the religious life of Jesus’ people, the Jews. It’s the city where God lives, for Jesus’ people. Jerusalem is the scene of the climax of the story Jesus is a part of.

Jesus has strong feelings for Jerusalem.

- Lament over Jerusalem: 13:31-35 (Jesus talks about wishing he could gather Jerusalem like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but they were not willing)
- Weeping over Jerusalem: 19:41-44 (Jesus predicts quite clearly that Jerusalem will fall, especially v. 43-44... They will crush you to the ground... All because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God)

So Jesus has finally made the long and winding trip from Galilee to Jerusalem and his disciples point out to him the beauty of the temple.

The temple was hugely important for Jews in Jesus day. In many ways, the temple was where God was. It was where the priests were; it was where sacrifices were offered for praise, for atoning for sins, etc. The temple was where pilgrimages were made during Jewish feasts like the Passover.

It was an impressive structure, as we see in the first verses.

The temple represented the majesty of Israel’s God.

And so when the disciples drew Jesus’ attention to the temple, they probably were expecting an approving response. “Yeah, that sure is something, isn’t it? What a magnificent structure, devoted to God.” They may even have been imagining Jesus overthrowing the Romans, setting up shop in the temple, and getting down to the business of running the kingdom!

But that’s not what they got.

What they got was a lengthy prediction of the doom and destruction that was the destiny of the temple and of the entire city of Jerusalem, and the promise of persecution and suffering for their faith.

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It is a strange text. Along with its parallels in Matthew and Mark, this text has been read in very unhelpful and speculative ways throughout Christian history (and continues to be read in these ways today).

Before we tackle this passage, a few words about how we read the Bible.

Our national body Mennonite Church Canada is currently in the midst of the Being a Faithful Church process where we are looking at some difficult ethical issues and how we interpret the Bible in relation to these.

Some of you who have participated in these study sessions will remember the “paths and ditches” that we looked at earlier in the year. “Paths” were practices and principles to keep doing as we read and interpret the Bible together; “ditches” were mistakes to avoid.

Here’s a quote about some of the ditches from the BFC process:

*The desire to keep Jesus central to hermeneutics [interpreting Scripture] at times leads some to disconnect him from his own scriptural roots (The Hebrew Bible) and his own social/ political context in 1st century Palestine. We need to avoid both of these ditches and not leave Jesus without a context.*

It’s very important that we do not reduce the Bible to context-free holy words from a timeless holy book.

So many people have done this throughout history and continue to do so today—particularly around texts like this one, or some of the more exotic passages from books like Revelation or Daniel.

**Jesus is speaking to specific people (from a specific religious and cultural worldview) at a specific time and place.**

He is speaking in apocalyptic language—a form that would have been far better understood *then* than it is *now*

Apocalyptic speech and writing was poetic, highly symbolic, and was a way of bringing out the theological significance of historical events.

N.T. Wright describes this well in his book, *The New Testament and the People of God*:

Apocalyptic language uses complex and highly coloured metaphors in order to describe one event in terms of another, thus bringing out the perceived “meaning” of the first.

We do this all the time ourselves. I have often pointed out to students that, to describe the fall of the Berlin Wall, as one well might, as an “earth-shattering event” might perhaps lead some future historian, writing in the *Martian Journal of Early European Studies*, to hypothesize that an earthquake had caused the collapse of the Wall, leading to both sides realizing they could live together after

all. A good many readings of apocalyptic literature in our own century operate on about that level of misunderstanding.<sup>1</sup>

Many people read Jesus' words about wars and rumours of wars and false prophets and dreadful portents in the sky and "the Son of Man coming on the clouds" (which, according to many scholars, was a symbolic way of speaking borrowed from the book of Daniel which pointed to a "mighty reversal of fortunes *within* history") and assume that Jesus is talking about the end of the world or the final judgment.

But when we read this text in context, we see that Jesus is talking about a much shorter horizon.

He is warning his disciples about events that will happen *in their lifetime*.

The text is about how the temple and all it stood for would be destroyed.

In 70 AD, the Jerusalem Temple *was* destroyed—not a stone left standing, just as Jesus predicted.

In 66 AD, a group of Jewish revolutionaries rose up against Rome and occupied the Temple. They held it for a few years, but eventually Rome had enough, and went to deal with the troublemakers in the manner that Rome dealt with all of its problems.

Brutal force.

Jesus is also warning his disciples that those who followed him would experience great persecution, that he would be with them, helping them to testify, giving them wisdom, etc.

And he *was* with them when they *did* face persecution.

According to tradition, and with the exception of Judas (who hanged himself after betraying Jesus) and John (who died in exile on the Island of Patmos), each of the disciples died violent deaths as a result of their determination to bear witness, to testify to the gospel.

To make a long story short (and I've barely done it justice here), this text and its parallels in Matthew and Mark are not texts about the second coming of Jesus or about the end of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 282.

They are about the end of the age of the Jerusalem regime, the temple and all it stood for, the entire corrupt system that resisted Jesus and his offer of peace and salvation, and about the challenge and the summons to be faithful in difficult and conflicted times.

I think that when we read the text in this way, we are able to make more sense out of passages like Luke 21:32, where Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.”

It’s difficult to make sense of Jesus’ words here if he’s speaking about the end of the world or about the second coming.

It’s easier to understand, if he is speaking about the fall of Jerusalem, and the end of the age of the oppressive Jewish political and religious system, with all of the burdensome laws that had been accumulated over time that weighed people down, and lack of justice and mercy and faithfulness, which was what God had always wanted from his people.

Jesus was not telling his disciples to try to discover the date and time of his return.

This passage and the ones that follow for the rest of Luke 21 were not given to the church as a research project to keep us occupied for millennia trying to decode historical events and political figures so that we could predict when the end of the world would come and when Jesus would finally usher in the eternal kingdom.

In Matthew 24:36 Jesus could not have been clearer.

*About that day or hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*

Could this text *also* teach us important things about the final judgment? Certainly.

I think the lessons will be far more general and symbolic than the specifics that so many people throughout history have obsessed about, but I have no doubt that Jesus could have had a number of endings in mind when he spoke these words.

To quote one of my seminary professors, though, “A text can always mean *more* than it meant in its original context; but it can never mean *less*.”

We must always start with, “what did this text mean for *them*?” before we move on to “what does this text mean for *us*?”

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So, what *does* this text mean for us?

It's a nice history lesson, perhaps, but we live in very different times than the one that gave birth to Jesus' words in our text today.

Not many of us face persecution for our faith (at least not here in North America. In other parts of the world, it's a different story!).

Not many of us worry about a brutal empire that is about to crush us.

Not many of us even worry about being hated or persecuted by our family members, much less being put to death!

In our culture, we are more likely to be ignored or politely tolerated for our religious conviction than to be persecuted for them.

Our main challenges may be complacency and comfort. Or, perhaps our challenges have to do with navigating the breakneck pace of change in the modern world, or the uncertainty that has come with the massive philosophical shifts in postmodern culture.

But even if we have our own challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> century west, we are a *long* way from the context in Luke 21.

Do Jesus' words have anything to say to us, in such different surroundings?

The title of this sermon is, "The Time is Near!" I chose this title not as a statement of what I believe about the chronology of Jesus' return, but because *as followers of Jesus, God's time is always near!*

God's time is *always* the time for vigilance, for faithfulness, for being alive and awake to God's kingdom coming.

No matter what time we live in, we are called to commit ourselves wholeheartedly to Jesus and his teachings.

No matter what time we live in, we are called to be ready to bear witness to the hope that we have found in the Crucified One.

No matter what time we live in, we are called to perseverance, patience, and a willingness to endure scorn, rejection, and persecution for the Christ.

No matter what time we live in, we are to stand firm and to trust that the same Jesus who spoke words of warning and hope to his disciples two thousand years ago, can be trusted in the present.

No matter what time we live in, we are to remember that we are citizens of a different kingdom—a kingdom that is always coming.

And, even if things are relatively comfortable for followers of Jesus in our day and age, we know that the earth can and does shift for us on a personal level.

A spouse dies. A divorce happens. A child is in trouble. A financial crisis looms. Depression makes an appearance. The way forward looks foggy and full of fear.

Sometimes it can feel like everything is falling apart for us, even when all around everything looks normal.

*Whatever our circumstances*, whether on the global or the personal scale, our text today tells us that Jesus is with us and can be trusted in the midst of chaos, conflict, and uncertainty.

*Hang in there*, he says. *Persevere. Keep the faith. I am with you. I know the way forward. I can be trusted to guard your soul, in this life and the next.*

So, may God help us to stand firm, in hard times, in easy times, in in-between times and confusing and unsettling times... In *every* time.

May God help us, with the prophet Isaiah whose words we declared in our Call to Worship, to say:

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and will not be afraid, for the Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation (Isaiah 12:2).

Amen.



