

Proper 28C: Luke 21:5-19
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Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. W. Terry Miller

I was in Barnes and Noble recently, looking through the stands of new books, when an endcap display caught my attention. What made this particular display so interesting was the theme it was highlighting: Surviving the End of the World. What was even stranger was that this bookstore was in Charlottesville, not a city known for being a hotbed of apocalypticism. But here was a display full of doomsday books: “The Prepper Survival Guide,” “The Prepper’s Medical Handbook,” “The Disaster Ready Home,” even “Survival Mom: How to Prepare Your Family for Everyday Disasters and Worst-Case Scenarios.” Such books, while strange to some, cater to a growing interest in “prepping,” or preparing for disaster, whether it be natural or financial or political.

To be fair, “preppers” are not as a group monolithic. There’s a spectrum. Some preppers live in areas that are prone to natural disasters like hurricanes, so they prepare by having water and food in case such supplies are unavailable in the wake of a disaster. Others believe that political or financial turmoil might lead to the breaking down of the American system of government. So, in addition to food, water, and shelter supplies, they prepare by stockpiling weapons and ammunition in case the rule of law breaks down. Some are even more convinced of an imminent disaster, and so have responded preemptively to catastrophe by moving to a sequestered homestead where they can live “off the grid,” that is, without dependence on the electrical grid and water system.

The first time I heard of “preppers” was about ten years ago, during the Great Recession, after the 2008 financial crisis. Interest in survivalism took off as so many people saw their way of life—their jobs, their savings, their dreams—lost or else at risk. They started wondering if what they were seeing wasn’t in fact signs of an even bigger societal collapse.

It was during this time that “Doomsday Preppers” became the #1 program on the National Geographic network! Not to be outdone, the Discovery Channel had its own survival-themed show, “Doomsday Bunkers”. Far from fringe, it was estimated at the time, in 2013, that there were 3.7 million Americans who identified as “preppers.” I don’t know what that number is today, but if we take as “proxies” the run to stock up on toilet paper in 2020, the number of whole home generators on backorder, and record gun sales in the past two years, I would expect that number has only grown since. In fact, a recently commissioned survey from Finder.com revealed that an estimated 68 million Americans have purchased “survival gear” as a direct result of political unrest or natural disasters in 2021. That is almost a quarter of the population.

Now, it's easy to dismiss such folks as “nut jobs,” “conspiracy-obsessed crazies,” and paranoid extremists. Clearly the world hasn’t ended. More generously, though, we could say that these folks are reacting—perhaps *overreacting*—to a newfound realization of the fragility of our way of life, of how vulnerable our economic systems, health care networks, supply chains, political institutions, and energy infrastructure are. I mean, you don’t have to be a “doomsday prepper” to

acknowledge that these past two years have revealed just how easily disrupted the organizations, systems and institutions that we rely on are.

Indeed, the problems we face as a nation—surge in crime, record inflation, economic recession, collapsed national border, high fuel prices, opioid and fentanyl overdoses, abuse of power by those in authority, the threat of nuclear war in Ukraine, the aggressive expansion of China—these are enough to make one think, Yeah, our world is on the verge of collapse. It's no wonder some people are thinking of an exit strategy, filling their basements with canned goods, propane canisters and ammunition.

As a Christian, though, I have to wonder, “What would Jesus prep”? Faced with an impending national collapse, how would Jesus prepare?

Well, I can't say I have an answer to that. Scripture doesn't say. But we do know what he told his followers regarding how *they* should respond to disasters they will face.

In this morning's gospel lesson, Jesus informs his disciples that the very things they see as permanent, enduring, as foundational to who they are and how they live—their identity as a nation, their food security, even their physical health—will come under threat. The foundations on which they stand, quite literally, will soon be rocked, overturned. The Temple itself, the very sign of God's presence among his people, will be destroyed, its massive stones torn down till one is not standing on another. But if that's not enough, Jesus says, they will be betrayed by family and friends, hauled before the court, maybe even executed. All because they love Jesus and believe in him.

Now, it's easy to think Jesus is pointing to specific future catastrophes about to befall God's people. We can identify certain events—the destruction of the Temple in 70AD and the eruption of Mt Vesuvius in Italy in 79 AD—that fit what Jesus is predicting here. But the other things Jesus mentions—wars and rumors of war, civil strife, wanna-be prophets asserting exclusive claim to God's truth, that they alone have the answer—it's hard to find a time in world history *not* characterized by these things. And to Jesus, none of these things are remarkable. They are not signs of the end, he says.

That doesn't stop the disciples from wanting to know when it will happen, if only so they know when they should stock up at Sam's Club and retreat to their bunkers. They don't want to be caught unawares. They want to be prepared.

But Jesus doesn't indulge their fears, he doesn't want to encourage their anxieties. Jesus just says matter-of-factly that these events are going to happen and he doesn't want them to be surprised. He wants them to be prepared, prepared by *not preparing*...! “Settle it therefore in your hearts not to prepare your defense in advance.” Now, if you are the sort that likes to plan for every scenario, this teaching would be pretty difficult. Heck, if you're just a normal person who doesn't want to be caught with your pants down when crisis strikes, you'd find Jesus' command tough to swallow! Prepare not to prepare?!? Yet Jesus knows human nature. He understands how hard it'll be to not worry, but he also knows that once you go down that rabbit hole, you'll never come out. It's hard not to become obsessed with it, to spend all your time working through

scenarios, what you'll do if this happens or that happens. And in the end you'll never feel secure, because there's always more you can do, some circumstance you haven't taken into account, some scenario you didn't plan for.

But that's not the worst of it though. You see, the thing that's most troubling about survivalism is that it is at root inwardly-focused, selfish. The goal is generally to make sure you and your loved ones are taken care of, that you've squirreled away enough provisions and done everything you can to fortify your home, so that in the event energy, food, medical supplies, etc. become scarce, you can retreat into your castle, your bunker, where you have everything you need. This may not be fair to all preppers, but it's very easy, when you're aware of all the dangers *out there*, to say, To heck with the world, I'm going to protect myself and my own.

This is a real danger for churches too, having this attitude, this "fortress mentality." It's tempting for us to look at how the world, the nation, society is trending—"to hell in a handbasket," we might say—and in response, say, Well, we're going to make sure that we're not affected. We can't stop all that political and ideological nonsense out there, so we're going to just retreat here, with our fellow Christians, and put up our proverbial defenses. It's understandable. Our culture in America has changed drastically in the past fifty years. Where once Christianity was the majority religion and Christian sensibility was the standard of public morality, today Christian views are definitely being marginalized, mocked, and attacked by political and cultural leaders in our country. It's not enough that fewer people attend church than before in living memory, but many of those outside the church are outright hostile to faith and wish to limit any influence Christians might have. And most Christians would be happy to just be left alone. We'll just take our ball and go home, where we can be safe, comfortable, surrounded by our newspapers, Twitter feeds and cable news stations that reinforce our views, and wait for Jesus to return. We're not only not preparing how we will answer when our faith is challenged, we've decided it's not even worth giving an answer; we are just wasting our breath, because "they'll never understand."

As I said, that's tempting, even understandable. But it's not what we should be doing, according to Jesus. Even if we think everyone is hostile to us, even if we think our "Christian world" is coming to an end, Jesus doesn't want us retreating into our own Christian enclave. Rather, in such a time, our calling, Jesus says, is to be witnesses, to share with others our faith and the reason for it. When we see numbers in church dwindling and Christian influence declining, it's tempting to circle the wagons. But rather than retreating to our homes, to our churches, Jesus says we should be out in the streets. Instead of turning inward, we should be going out. It's not enough that we don't surrender to the world, the world needs us to show it a better way.

You can see the importance of not retreating in fear in the stories of two churches I know. Oak Grove Church and Oak Hill Church. In the previous year, each of these churches had about 40 members – mostly older. Oak *Hill* church decided that it really wanted to grow and got back in touch with its neighborhood. The older women in the church started running an after-school program for the children in the community. The after-school program attracted many children. The children were not only cared for after school, they were also invited to church. The children came to church, with their parents. Within a year, Oak Hill Church had about 75 active members, a rather amazing growth in less than a year. Oak *Grove* Church, on the other hand, had the same

number of members, and was also concerned about its future, about self-preservation, but did not really want to reach out to their neighborhood. Their neighborhood had changed, you see. They were not the sort that fit the church like before. If by chance one of them visited at Oak Grove, they got the distinct impression that they were not welcomed. Not surprisingly, within just a few years, Oak Grove Church closed due to lack of viability. Oak Hill Church, on the other hand, is still going strong.

You know, when I came here two years ago, I decided to go door-to-door to meet our neighbors here along Spring Hill Avenue. If someone was home, I introduced myself and invited them to join us for worship on Sunday. I only got through this one street. Now, in keeping with Jesus' counsel this morning, I think we need to expand this reach, to get to know the rest of our neighbors around us. And to do so, I need your help. Starting after Thanksgiving, I will have a signup sheet for teams of parishioners, couples or pairs, to go out with me after worship on Sunday and during the week, to knock on doors and introduce ourselves to our neighbors. I'd like to have every member of this church sign up to go out one day.

I know that what I'm asking sounds scary to many of you all. You may be thinking, "I couldn't do that. I'd rather face the apocalypse!" But it really isn't anything so dreadful. We're not talking about making any high-pressure sales pitch. You won't be asked to answer any deep theological questions or share anything embarrassing. We're just talking about introducing yourself, inviting our neighbors to join us for worship and asking if there is anything we can pray for on their behalf. I hope to have a brochure about our church too that we can give them, something that highlights our upcoming Christmas events.

Many churches, as part of their Stewardship Campaign, do an "every member canvas." Well, this will be *our* every member canvas—every member canvassing our neighborhood to share all that God has done and is doing at Good Shepherd. This is a way we can show that, though the world is changing, we are unafraid, that come what may, we will not only stand firm, we will go forth boldly. This is an opportunity for us to witness to the fact that, though we don't know what the future holds, we know who holds the future. So, can I get a witness?