

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, November 13, 2016)

Text: Luke 25:5-19 (New Revised Standard Version)

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them.

"When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

"But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

Reflections by Pastor Donald: "A New Context"

As my predecessor, the Rev. Dr. Art Cribbs would say at the beginning of most every sermon here during his pastorate: It's been quite a week!

No matter what your political affiliation, religious belief, educated or uneducated opinion, I think we could all agree that it's been quite a week and the future is truly unknown to us. And that can be a very scary thing.

But as God says in another of our lectionary scriptures for today,

"I will make a new heaven and new earth,
and I shall begin with YOU.

Even now, I forgive.

Even now, I re-create.

Even now, I call you into something new.

I will make a new heaven and new earth,
and I am beginning with you, today."

Daunting, isn't it?

As the news of the week washed over me and prodded me into thoughts of how beautiful Canada is this time of year and, more seriously, what in the world is happening, I found the lyrics from a few of our beloved hymns rising to the surface of my soul:

“Gird up your loins, fresh courage take, Our God will never us forsake. And so our song no fear can quell; All is well! All is well!”

“...Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, It is well, it is well with my soul.”

For, truly, there is nothing that happens on this earth, nothing that happens in any political system or within any family system that can ever separate us from the love of God who is living within us, through us and around us at all times.

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding,” it says in the Book of Proverbs.

And in Psalm 118: it is “better to take refuge in God than to trust in human beings; better to take refuge in God than to follow leaders.”

Or, as the great Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, “Sorrow looks back, Worry looks around, Faith looks up!”

In today’s text drawn from the Gospel according to Luke, we hear Jesus speaking to any who will truly listen with their hearts and their minds to understand the temporal nature of this world. Even God’s holy temple, adorned with beautiful stones and dedicated gifts, He says, will be thrown down and one stone will not be stacked upon another.

But instead of being filled with hope that the God’s kin-dom will finally be coming to complete fruition, how do those humans standing in for us react? With fear. Abject, instant and, truthfully, understandable fear. “When’s that gonna happen?” they cry. “Where can I run and hide so that I’m sure one of those stones doesn’t fall on me?”

And how does Jesus respond? By saying as he so often does, “do not be afraid” or, even more viscerally here, “do not be terrified.” For he knows that wars and insurrections and nations rising against nations are terrifying for that very human part of us that is tied to this earth and its manifestations. But the part he’s concerned with is that part which no famine or earthquake or even election can touch: that part of us that is the REAL us, the eternal us. “Make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance,” he says, appealing to that eternal part within each of us, “for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.”

In the extraordinary experience I just emerged from as I met with about 450 other soul-searching men last week deep in the state of New Mexico on land once occupied by the Tamayame and known as a “quiet and special place,” I had to put myself in the hands of Jesus as I was confronted with some of my deepest fears and hesitations in being truly immersed in the Spirit of God.

I didn’t actually know what to expect in going to this conference called “Drawing from a Deep Well.” All I knew was that Father Richard Rohr, who I think of as one of our greatest living theologians, was going to be speaking and I knew I wanted to hear what he was saying in this particular time and place.

What I didn’t know is that I was going to be expected to draw from a deeper well myself as we were divided into small groups called “councils” – first as a council of 6 and then as a council of 12 – to share deeply throughout the week from our own personal experiences and to listen to one another – these strangers – as they shared from their own deep wells and we trusted each other with our very souls.

One of the intentions of these councils is to “be spontaneous and authentic” and, boy, was that difficult as many of my fears and my reticence to trust rose to the surface first and all I wanted to do was run and hide either behind a chair or behind my words.

But just as Jesus instructed his listeners in today’s text to not prepare in advance, so I found that by trusting my heart to these men who I initially considered strangers and being open to what God

was prodding me to say in the moment led me to a place of understanding and trust both of others and myself that couldn't have occurred had I given in to my fears and my first inclination to doubt.

I hold that experience of grace out to you now as we face an uncertain future and wonder where God is calling to us in our lives as Americans, but, so much more importantly, as citizens of God's kingdom where Jesus tells us by our endurance we will gain our souls.

Dr. David Lose looks at this apocalyptic passage and helps us remember how it would have been heard in the time of Luke when he was writing it. These kinds of passages, he says, "were offered to help believers struggling from oppression and persecution put their struggles into the larger context of the universal struggle between God and the forces of evil. In this way," he writes, "such passages provided comfort that no matter how difficult things became, God would not abandon them and that God would ultimately prevail, thereby encouraging believers to persevere in the meantime and, indeed, to witness to their faith in times of persecution."

It's all in the context you see. So often in our lives you and I are tempted to narrow down, to see only that which is happening to us in our own bodies, our own homes and our own experiences as what is true and real. But, in the ultimate reality, there is far more going on than we can ever truly see with our human eyes or experience with our earth-bound feelings.

In the larger context of God's realm, Life with a capital L is happening all around us. The universe is expanding and galaxies are growing at a rate we can't even begin to comprehend. And more than being a reason to be afraid, this understanding of the larger context of what's happening around us and within us right now is what I believe gives us a reason to HOPE!

What else is God creating? Where else will God take us? What new ideas and adventures will be given to us that we may spread the good news of God's love and the power of God in all situations in the days and weeks and years ahead? How can we place ourselves in the larger context of God's love and grace that we may show this love and grace to others?

In an incredible article a dear friend of mine sent me called, "We Were Made for These Times," Women Who Run with the Wolves author Clarissa Pinkola Estes writes, "My friends, do not lose heart. We were made for these times. I have heard from so many recently who are deeply and properly bewildered. They are concerned about the state of affairs in our world now. Ours is a time of almost daily astonishment and often righteous rage over the latest degradations of what matters most to civilized, visionary people.

"You are right in your assessments" she admits. "The lustre and hubris some have aspired to while endorsing acts so heinous...is breathtaking. Yet, I urge you, ask you, gentle you, to please not spend your spirit dry by bemoaning these difficult times. Especially do not lose hope. Most particularly because, the fact is that we were made for these times.

"Yes," she exclaims. "For years, we have been learning, practicing, been in training for and just waiting to meet on this exact plain of engagement.

"In any dark time, she continues, "there is a tendency to veer toward fainting over how much is wrong or unmended in the world. Do not focus on that. There is a tendency, too, to fall into being weakened by dwelling on what is outside your reach, by what cannot yet be. Do not focus there. That is spending the wind without raising the sails.

"Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach. Any small, calm thing that one soul can do to help another soul, to assist some portion of this poor suffering world, will help immensely.

"It is not given to us to know which acts or by whom, will cause the critical mass to tip toward an enduring good... One of the most calming and powerful actions you can do to intervene in a stormy

world is to stand up and show your soul... (for) the light of the soul throws sparks, can send up flares, builds signal fires, [and] causes proper matters to catch fire.

“To display the lantern of soul in shadowy times like these,” she concludes, “- to be fierce and to show mercy toward others; both are acts of immense bravery and greatest necessity.” Hallelujah!

Friends, we are called to see ourselves in the greater context of God’s kin-dom, to reach out to those who we disagree with or don’t know, to see the world from the vantage point of our souls and to know that love and kindness and mercy are the only ways we can ever be truly united in this time or in any other. To live that way is to dwell within the context of our ever loving and still speaking God.

Amen.