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Proper 15 (C) ~ August 17, 2025
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
Hebrews 11:29—12:2
Psalm 82
Luke 12:49-56

Something's Coming

In the words of the Prophets Stephen Sondheim and Leonard Bernstein, in “West Side Story”:

*Could it be? Yes, it could.
Something's coming, something good,
If I can wait.
Something's coming, I don't know what it is
But it is
Gonna be great!*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

I.

If you were in the DC area 14 years ago this week, you felt it.

Indeed, if you were pretty much anywhere on the eastern seaboard of the United States – and even up into Canada – you likely experienced some of the impact.

Scientists speculate that more people were affected than by any other event of its kind in US history.¹

¹<https://energy.virginia.gov/geology/earthquakes.shtml#:~:text=The%20August%2023%2C%202011%20Magnitude,felt%20in%20Virginia%20was%20recorded.>

My family and I were on our annual vacation on the Outer Banks of North Carolina on August 23, 2011, having a late lunch on the deck of our rental house, when the wooden planks beneath us moved. We'd just come back from the beach, and initially we thought that it was just our dog shaking the sand out of her fur under the table.

When it didn't stop immediately, I did what one does at times such as this: I ran to find my phone. And there it was, all over my texts and newsfeed and social media: A magnitude 5.8 earthquake had struck in Virginia, with its epicenter about 90 miles south and west of Washington. Pretty much everyone I knew – in this time zone, at least – was reporting the same phenomenon.

This was not isolated or local; it was no mere dog shake.

As we know, the foundation of our own beloved Washington National Cathedral shook, its pillars cracked and gargoyles were pried loose, causing upwards of \$35 million in damage.

To this day, parts of the building remain shrouded in scaffolding.

Geologists describe a **rupture** that began four miles beneath the earth's surface. "Accumulated stress" deep below ground sent seismic waves up and down the coast.²

And the rest, as they say, is history.

II.

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus says to the vast crowds that have come out to hear Him:

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided:

² *Ibid*

*father against son
and son against father,
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."*

This prophetic, **disruptive** language from our Lord is deeply disturbing, isn't it? It flies in the face of the image many of us have of Jesus, "meek and mild," Jesus the Good Shepherd, Jesus inviting children to gather at His feet. This sounds like what some of our Bible Study participants like to call "Cranky Jesus." Here He seems angry, and punitive, and perhaps even vengeful, determined more to tear down than to build up. And indeed, to anyone meeting Jesus for the first time in this passage, He may appear more to be feared than loved.

I can assure you, this is *not* the preacher's preferred text! Pretty much every priest I know who is in the pulpit today has been lamenting the same thing this past week.

Especially at this time of ever-widening political and philosophical fissures in this country, why-oh-why did Jesus have to say *that*?

We all probably know families for whom these words are all-too painfully true these days – families with empty chairs (literally or figuratively) at the dinner table, or rent asunder by very public arguments on social media.

It's not pretty, and it's not good.

And...

I caution us against interpreting the picture Jesus paints as either isolated or local; it is no mere proverbially dog shake under the table.

By that I mean that it is very easy and tempting to domesticate Jesus' language, to understand it as directed *only* to the very immediate cares and concerns that we carry on our hearts today. And that would be a mistake – certainly in this case.

Because I can promise you, with complete and utter confidence, that the divisions we are experiencing here-and-now in our wounded world, scarred as it is by selfishness, hatred, and greed, are most decidedly *not* of God.

I know that as well as I know my own name. And so do you.

As it says in the Book of Lamentations, in a passage often read at funerals,

*[God] does not willingly afflict
or grieve anyone* (Lamentations 3:33).

I believe this, with all my heart. I hope you do, too.

After all, is this not the same Jesus Who prays that His followers “may become completely one, **so that** the world may know that [God has]...loved them” (John 17:22-23)?

Jesus longs for unity, with a purpose.

It is a gross misunderstanding to assume that Jesus wills division among the People of God.

Jesus isn't making threats. On the contrary: He is explaining what will happen – inevitably – as a result of the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God. Tables will be turned. The very foundation of the world will shake. The *status quo* will be disrupted.

The rupture will be cosmic, and seismic.

And this, Dear Ones, is a Very Good Thing.

Remember that in the first century the land on which Jesus was born and where He lived and taught and preached and healed and died was occupied territory – occupied by the Roman Empire. And what did the Empire want more than anything, at all cost?

It wanted to maintain peace. The famed (or infamous) *Pax Romana*, the 200 or so-year period of stability that made imperial power and growth possible. So in Jesus' own time, and in the time when Luke was writing a few decades later, the concept of "peace" was loaded. It was not all flowers and butterflies and *kumbaya*. The peace experienced in the Near East at the time was peace with a price.

Of course, this period was not all bad: The Roman Empire is known for its many innovations, and indeed the *Pax Romana* in many ways allowed for the spread of the Gospel throughout the ancient world.

Nevertheless: The "division" Jesus describes, the rift that He knows to be unavoidable, is a result of the "accumulated stress," the tension, the clash between the values of the earthly Empire and those of the Gospel. Or, in the words of the "Hallelujah Chorus," from Handel's *Messiah*,

*The kingdom of this world
Is become the kingdom of our Lord,
And of His Christ...
And He shall reign for ever and ever.*

III.

Most of us, I am sure, have stood on a Metro or Amtrak platform and experienced the rumble of the approaching train before it is visible or even audible. The movement produces vibrations all along the tracks that can be felt in the seemingly stationary building in advance of the train's arrival.

I think this might be somewhat akin to what Jesus is getting at this morning.

"Something's coming," He says. "Be alert!"

The plates beneath our feet are shifting.

[Jesus] also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

Why, Jesus asks, do we not *expect* the rupture, expect the advancing disruption?

Of course things get messy when the Kingdom of God breaks in!

Do we just *assume* that God is going to endorse the *Pax Romana*, the peace of the status quo? Do we not anticipate that Jesus is going to turn the tables?

As the author of the Book of Hebrews writes,

the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow (Hebrews 4:12).

There will be those who hear the Word and respond, and those who don't – or, for whatever reason, can't. In this sense there will be a separation, a sorting. There will be division.

There *is* division.

But division, *for its own sake*, is never the goal.

IV.

In today's Gospel Jesus makes not so much a threat as a *promise*, pointing down the tracks to a coming time when the way things are will no longer be the way things are. Of course, to Jesus' immediate audience, the thousands gathered to hear Him preach and teach, it made sense to assume that this promised disruption would be imminent – within the span of their lifetime. By the time of Luke's writing a few

decades later, it was clear that, while the Kingdom of God had broken into human history with the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, it was not yet complete. The Kingdom had not been fully realized – yet.

The Kingdom still is not fully realized today, two thousand years later. (Or, as you’ve heard me say before, at least I hope not! I surely trust that there are better things coming than we are experiencing now.) But, it also must be said, that is according to *our* calendar – our chronological, Monday-Tuesday-Wednesday-Thursday-Friday timetable. According to our expectations and agenda, the Kingdom of this world should have well and truly become the Kingdom of our Lord by now...Right?

Alas: We are not in charge. And we know that God’s time – *Kairos* – the “opportune or seasonable time,” “the right time”³ – is, in fact, different than our time.

And we’re not there – yet.

V.

And so, in the words of the great American poet Langston Hughes,

*What happens to a dream deferred?*⁴

What are those of us who love and trust Jesus, whose hearts are inspired by and on fire for the Gospel, to do *in the meantime*? How are we to live in the already-but-not-yet period, this time when it feels to many of us that the values of God’s Kingdom are being ignored, if not out-and-out negated?

Values such as love of neighbor and respect for the dignity of every human being, and caring for the “least of these” in our midst?

³ <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/kairos.html>

⁴ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46548/harlem>

We are to abide, my friends. We are to persevere. We are to continue preaching and teaching and embodying and sharing the Love of God for *all* of God's children. We are to work for God's justice and peace – the true peace, which passes all understanding. Not just the *Pax Romana*.

We are to remain steadfast, insofar as we are able – understanding, of course, that we are human and therefore limited. We do get discouraged, and we begin to slide into trusting the fallacy that the way things are is the way things always will be.

But it's just that – a fallacy. It is a gross misunderstanding.

Jesus promises that there is a rupture, a disruption, a holy division and separation, coming. Like the rupture of childbirth, or the disruption of a seemingly stationary stone from a tomb.

New life is on the horizon, even now. And it is turning tables. It is upsetting the *status quo*.

Something's coming...and it's going to be great.

May we trust that it is so, *Amen*.