

## Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Luke's account of Jesus teaching in the Temple takes place on the journey to Jerusalem that will reach its completion with his death on a cross. On the twenty-eighth Sunday after Pentecost, the church hears this gospel as a pilgrim people who find themselves in the middle of the story. Luke 21 evokes memory and hope, both a "looking back" and "looking forward" by which the Spirit conforms the church to the way of Jesus Christ that finds its end in the fullness of love for God and neighbor. The whole of Luke's Gospel has pointed in this direction in presenting Jesus as the Son of God, Israel's Messiah, and Savior of the world. This presentation, however, cannot be separated from the particular contours of Luke's narrative that render the identity of Jesus as the One who announces and establishes God's reign in the world by the empowerment of the Spirit who is prominent at every stage of his life and ministry.

That there is an "eschatological" mood, tone, and orientation in Luke 21 is undeniable. In preparing for a sermon from this passage, the preacher would do well to follow closely the manner in which the words of Jesus "show" rather than "explain" the eschatological reality of God's reign to encourage the endurance of faith during the "time of the world."<sup>1</sup> Luke's narrative, then, invites the preacher to see more clearly the reality of God's reign that is made present in all that Jesus says, does, and suffers. This is particularly important in preaching from Jesus' eschatological discourse in the Temple, a message that is often extracted from the narrative of Luke's Gospel and treated as a formula that provides knowledge for calculating the time of the world's "end."

A sermon from Luke 21 could be informed by the location of Jesus' teaching concerning the approaching "end" of God's time. He has entered the Temple, the visible manifestation of God's presence in the midst of Israel as a blessing to the nations. This location is not incidental for the third gospel, since Luke's narrative of Jesus Christ begins and ends with scenes in the

Temple; a liturgical space in which the whole of life is referred to Israel's God as Creator and Redeemer of all that is. Preaching from Luke 21 could be seen as a "liturgical act"—oriented to the praise of God—that calls the church to connect its life and work in the world to its worship, as an offering of thankful surrender to God in following after the way of Jesus Christ.

The preacher might also be helped by considering Luke's introduction to Jesus' eschatological discourse in the Temple; the remarkable story of a poor widow whose complete self-offering points to God's self-gift in the passion and death of Jesus (Lk. 21:1–4). Luke tells us Jesus looked up and saw many wealthy people placing their gifts in the Temple treasury, offerings of money for the maintenance of the sanctuary and its daily sacrifices. There are people from Jerusalem and the surrounding regions, as well as pilgrims from across the Diaspora. Jesus, however, directed attention to a poor widow who put in two copper coins, the smallest unit of money there was. His response to the widow's action must have surely been startling to those around him. "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."

If we read this scene as an introduction to the eschatological discourse of Luke 21, the widow's offering provides a way of seeing the reign of God proclaimed by Jesus; "that God turns to human beings completely and without any reservation in order to bring divine abundance to the world."<sup>2</sup> God's self-giving is a decisive historical event; it is happening now in Israel and in the new community raised up with Jesus by the Spirit. The story of the widow's offering, then, opens a window on the world as the space in and through which God is at work completing all things under Christ as Lord. The world is the space in which the church experiences and bears witness to the glory of the overflowing self-giving of Jesus, offering wholehearted

1. On "the time of the world" see Charles Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 145.

2. Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 220.

devotion to God as exemplified by the act of the poor widow.

The story of the poor widow's total self-offering directs attention away from the architectural magnificence and splendor of the Temple, a sign of Israel's enduring religious strength and stability, to the glory of God displayed by Jesus in his manner of living, suffering, and dying. This is the significance of the Temple for the world: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength." In light of the poor widow's offering, the eschatological words of Jesus also open up a window onto the "time of the world" as one of yearning, weakness, uncertainty, vulnerability and incompleteness. The social conditions described by Jesus point to the constant temptation to satisfy the longing for completion, finality, and satisfaction through historical commitments, arrangements, and achievements. A sermon that follows the words of Jesus might point to the witness of the church during the "time of the world" as displaying a particular ethic of disciplined love—for God and neighbor. This "ascetic" way of life nourishes and sustains the hope of a community whose vision is kept open by adoring praise of God.

There is a great temptation to read the "signs of the times" as possessing a kind of "eschatological" finality, certainty, and completion that demand the church's wholehearted commitment in the name of doing God's will. Many

preachers have been fond of citing a popular assertion that has been attributed to theologian Karl Barth; that sermons should be preached with the Bible in one hand and the *New York Times* in the other. The words of Jesus, however, relativize the "news" reported by sources such as the *New York Times* in light of the gospel of God's reign he proclaimed and embodied completely. Political conflict and partisanship; uprisings, insurrections, and terrorist attacks; military action and threats of war; natural disasters and devastating loss; religious persecution and betrayal; cultural isolation and marginalization, are acknowledged but relativized by Jesus. Such events, including their crises and consequences, should not be seen as signs of "ends" that command the total reverence, loyalty, and devotion owed to God.

The reign of God revealed in the self-giving of Jesus is the "end" that is the church's one and only hope. Luke 21 opens up any number of widows onto the joys and struggles of the church as a people "on the way" into the fullness of God's reign during the "time of the world." Preaching from this text provides an opportunity to call the church to renewed trust in God. As a pilgrim people called to a life of whole - hearted surrender to God in all things, its endurance in the way of Jesus Christ summons the world to recognize it is neither the source nor end of its own life, but is rather a gift and expression of God's self-giving love.

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