



## The Sky is Falling

Luke 21:5-19

Rev. Thomas G. James

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Over the past few months leading up to last Tuesday's election day, and perhaps one could argue still enduring today as we await the final tallies on some belabored counting, we have endured the plight of Chicken Little.

Do you remember this beloved children's story character?

Chicken Little gets hit in the head by a falling acorn, and cries fowl.

I digress ... you know the story, Chicken Little, having been hit in the head by a falling acorn, cries out, "The sky is falling!" Chicken Little then tells Henny Penny, and they go together to tell Goosey Loosey, and they go together to tell Ducky Lucky, and then they go tell Turkey Lurkey. All the while they are screaming up a storm, "The sky is falling! The sky is falling!" And then, all four go together to tell Foxy Loxy, who says to them, "Why don't you take shelter in my den for protection."

And you know, I don't think I've read a more complete synopsis of our American political environment. One person feels like some enormous weight of pain has fallen upon them (when it was really an insignificant acorn), and they go crying out to their neighbors. And before you know it, the whole neighborhood is yelling together, "The sky is falling!" And then, some fox comes along looking for an easy meal, and says, "Hey, you all should just vote for me, because I can stop the sky from falling on you." But really, the fox is nothing more than an opportunistic predator who needs their votes.

And if you think that's a stretch, just consider how much more pleasant it is to watch TV tonight that it was a week ago. The commercials prior to election day were nothing more than political ads crying out, "The sky is falling!" Candidates and PACs from both major parties were crying out, "The sky is falling! But vote for us, because like the fox, we can save you."

If only Jesus had something to say about the falling sky.

Wait, what's that? ... He did?

"What did Jesus have to say about Chicken Little, Pastor Thomas?"

I'm glad you asked.

Look at today's text ... Jesus is literally talking about the falling sky. He is speaking about the temple, saying, "The days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

You think it hurts getting hit on the head with an acorn? How about the stones from the top of the Jerusalem temple hitting you on the head as the temple crumbles!?

And, keep reading, Jesus talks about the fox who is trying to lure you away from faithfulness. In verse 8, Jesus offers, “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.”

This is Word of Chicken Little for the people of Chicken Little. Thanks be to Chicken Little.

Now, Luke is writing this gospel text sometime around 80 AD – nearly 50 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. In this text, Luke is offering Jesus up as a prophet. He’s writing, many years after the fact, that Jesus had correctly prophesied that the temple would be destroyed – which did happen in 70 AD. As Scholar John Carroll notes, “While lying in the future for Jesus’ audience within the temple, the siege and fall of Jerusalem lie in the past for Luke’s readers.”<sup>i</sup>

The worst that Jesus’ immediate audience could imagine had happened: their beloved temple – the grand Jerusalem temple – had been destroyed. But, even as cataclysmic as this event was, it was not the end as Jesus had described. Jesus talked about the eschaton – the end times to come – as being marked with wars and insurrections, earthquakes, famines, and plagues.

Yet, even in the face of such hardships, in the events that could make the fall of the Temple seem insignificant, Jesus says there’s no need to cry, “The Sky is falling!” Such a worry, as Jesus describes it in this text, is focused on the wrong things.

We live in a drastically different world today. We live in a democracy, not the Roman Empire. We live in a world in which Christianity is not persecuted as it was in the first century. We live in a nation where Christians still hold the majority of the seats of power in local, state, and national politics. And yet, some of the loudest voices in our nation that are crying, “The sky is falling!” come from within the Christian church.

I want us to look at this text a bit more intentionally today to consider why such a fearful cry goes against Jesus’ prophecy, and consider a more faithful approach to the supposed falling sky.

In verses 9 through 11, Jesus gives some indication of what will mark the beginning of the eschaton. This text presents us with an *eschatology* - a study of the *eschaton*, a word that is defined as “the end of the world.” Jesus is telling us what we should expect to experience before the end of the world. We will experience these things, he says: there will be wars and insurrections. But, even when we experience these things, we should not be fearful, for the end is not yet to come. ... Jesus also says that “nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and famines and plagues.” These are all terrible events, which will happen, Jesus says, before the end of the world.

But, as we keep reading, we find Jesus doesn’t want us to focus on these things as if they will quickly usher in the eschaton. In fact, multiple times in this text (as in others) Jesus says, “before this happens ...”, or, “the end will not come quickly ...”, or “do not worry about tomorrow, but let tomorrow worry about itself.”

See, Jesus isn't so much worried about when the end will come as he is about how we will be living while we await such an ending. This text, coming in the midst of a number of parables and teachings doing the same, is "telling the disciples how to behave while awaiting the end."<sup>ii</sup>

Let's look at verse 12. "Before all of this begins ..." (that is, before these signs which are the precursors to the end of the world,) "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."

Read the text closely. This does *not* say you will become kings and governors; it says you will be brought before them. The promise of this text is not that we, as faithful followers of Christ, will be given high seats of power. No, Jesus says, if we're doing what we're supposed to be doing – if we're living as we have been taught to live according to the will of God – then we will be brought before the seats of power as those who are criminals, not as those who are to be rewarded.

And, continue reading, when we are brought before those in power, we will be given the opportunity to testify.

We, as those who have been arrested such that we should be brought before political leaders to plead for mercy, should not use those opportunities to plead for mercy, but instead to proclaim the truth of God's love for God's created. Jesus says, "make up your minds *not* to prepare your defense in advance." The goal in such a situation is not to defend yourself, as if you are sorry for what landed you in the hot seat. You should not prepare excuses for doing the work of God in this world. "I will give you words and a wisdom," Jesus says, "that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict."

Jesus makes clear, this thing called discipleship, this is not an easy calling – but be sure, it is a calling. It doesn't matter if you are ordained clergy or a member of the laity. It doesn't matter if you are a liturgist, or if you prefer to stay seated in your pew; it doesn't matter if you are in the choir or someone who doesn't even sing along with the hymns; it doesn't matter if you are worshipping in person or online, it doesn't matter if you wake up early to serve breakfast on Mondays or if sleep in late; it doesn't matter if you are employed by the church or by the state. Following Jesus is a calling in whatever form it takes; and Jesus seems certain that any such calling – whatever it looks to like to be living by the Word of God in your life – will not be a popular decision. The public, the politicians, those in seats of power will not be enthused.

And this is what we seem to have forgotten about the witness of the Church today, and the reason so many people cry out, "The sky is falling," as if we are shocked by what we see.

We seem to have forgotten about Jesus' promise of what is to come, as if the world would appreciate the proclamation of God's will for humanity ... as if God's preference for the poor and the lowly would be embraced by those with power, privilege, or wealth.

Why do we, even those of us in the Church, cry out as if the sky is falling? As Theologian Justo Gonzalez offers, "We prefer a "gospel" without eschatology - a "good news" without hope - because for many of us such "good news" is not so good. We prefer a gospel without eschatology, because the good news of the great reversal that Luke has been proclaiming all along does not seem so good to us. If the

promised great reversal is for the benefit of sinners rather than properly religious folk, for the exploited, for the poor, for those who have no other hope, where does that leave us?"<sup>iii</sup> [Those of us with privilege, power, steady incomes, and discretionary funds?]

When people on the margins are given voice and vote, when those who have been outcast are centered in the conversation, when those who have been stripped of opportunity are finally lifted up and bailed out, those who hold the privilege cry "this is not fair – the sky is falling!" But friends, this is the very message of God in Jesus Christ that we, the Church, are supposed to proclaim and to which we are supposed to give witness.

But we shouldn't be shocked, not by our own Chicken Little response, or that of others. We've allowed the power of the state to commandeer the Church for its own use. We've forgotten our gifted identity as those who are empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the Body of Christ in the world.

Again, as Theologian Justo Gonzalez offers, "Those of us whom society considers respectable "mainline" Christians must understand that the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the promise of hope of the great reversal, make the phrase "mainline Christian" a contradiction in terms - that the very name of "Christian" requires being on the sidelines, on the margins where people suffer and are exploited or ignored."<sup>iv</sup>

This is not popular work, and it will not be widely embraced. As Jesus says, "You will be betrayed by family, and hated because of my name."

It is not popular to call out the isms that plague our culture, but God's justice demands it. It is not popular to de-center the self for the benefit of the greater whole, but the shalom of God requires it. It is not popular to give up seats of power so that those who have always been restricted from power might have a voice *and* a vote, but God's reconciliation insists upon it. It is not popular to share wealth for the benefit of the poor, but our Scriptures teach it. It is not popular to challenge privilege for the sake of human equity, but God's love necessitates it.

This is the work of God's people – us, God's Church – even knowing that majority voices many not agree.

But friends, we shouldn't be surprised. And we need not fear the sky that seems to be falling. For we have been gifted by the Creator to do this work; we have been endowed with the Spirit to sustain us in this work; and we have the witness of Christ to guide us as we declare God's truth, proclaim God's will, and share God's love.

So be encouraged by Christ, and be steadfast in your call, that we might declare and proclaim God's love for everyone. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> John T. Carroll. *Luke, The New Testament Library*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.

<sup>ii</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez. *Luke, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

<sup>iii</sup> Gonzalez.

<sup>iv</sup> Gonzalez.