

One plot at a time: Luke 21:5-19

by [Roberta Bondi](#) in the [November 2, 2004](#) issue

If I could tell when the end times were on their way by the number of wars, famines, earthquakes and plagues that are afflicting our world, I'd say, "Wow! Here they come!" The Middle East, Africa, Asia, Latin America—you name it, atrocities are taking place. Even in the United States of America, the home of the free, the hope of the huddled masses, the place where no one really has to go hungry, human-caused disaster is everywhere.

Consider the terrible things that are happening to the poor and sick who have lost their medical care, to children in awful schools, to their underpaid, often terrified teachers. Think of young women and men who have struggled for their educations and now have no work, of older folks who have been laid off, of others trying to make it the best they can in jobs that pay so little. Surely we are not waiting for the end times; we are already there.

There are two things, however, that trip me up when I am tempted to read the Lukan passage in this immediate way. First, Jesus says in other places, pretty emphatically, that nobody knows the day and the hour of the end except God alone. This means, as my former colleague Bill Mallard used to say, if you think you know when it's coming, the very fact you think so is proof that you don't.

The other thing that stops me in my tracks is that Luke 21:12 and the verses following make it very clear that before the great apocalyptic end of life as we have known it, we Christians will be arrested and otherwise persecuted because of our faithfulness to the gospel, and by this be given the chance to testify to the gospel.

This is tough—no kidding. Before the end comes, I am going to testify to the truth of the gospel that because each person is of infinite value to God, no one ought to withhold from anybody what they need for life. That wealth is not God's reward to the righteous or poverty God's punishment. That God's most particular concern is for the helpless, the poor and struggling, the hopeless and the outcast. That getting revenge on the personal or national level is wrong. And I should expect a lot of trouble for speaking out.

Witness, how? Considering the enormity of the world's problems, all the injustice, callousness and greed and the suffering and pain that follow them, I am tempted to lie down and not get up again. How can I testify to the gospel in a massively afflicted world when I am only one person, and an insignificant one at that?

Ruminating on all this, I find my life and my Christian hope being saved once again by a great early monastic teacher of the Egyptian desert, Poemen. Apparently, in a fit of grandiose enthusiasm with respect to his own potential for sacrificial witness, one of Poemen's disciples asked him what Jesus meant when he said that "no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." His answer, I am certain, is not at all what the disciple expected:

In truth [Poemen told him] if someone hears an evil saying, that is, one which harms him, and in his turn, he wants to repeat it, he must fight in order not to say it. Or if someone has taken advantage of it and he bears it, without retaliation at all, then he is giving his life for his neighbor.

In short, as the abbas and the ammas of the desert tell their disciples repeatedly, and tell me, too, no matter how serious or global the problem, insisting on a grandiose solution can end only in despair.

I must remember instead that, though there are "the hungry," "the collateral damage" of war, "the unemployed" or "unregistered aliens," it is individuals, single children, men and women, who are hungry, sick, out of work or without limbs from bombs that fell on their houses. It is these folks, not abstract categories, that need my witness.

It is tempting to think that nothing really is done for anybody by seemingly small, everyday things when the problems are so systemic. As my teachers remind me, however, the truth is just the opposite: without the little things, there are no big changes.

One day, when a brother came to his teacher despairing because he was so far behind in his prayers he figured he would never catch up, his abba told him a story:

A man had a plot of land that had become a wilderness of thistles and thorns. He decided to cultivate it and said to his son: "Go and clear that ground." But when the son went to clear it, he saw that the thistles and thorns had multiplied. He thought,

“How much time shall I need to clear and weed all this?”and lay on the ground instead, and went to sleep. He did this day after day.

When his father found him doing nothing, the son explained his discouragement. The father replied, “Son, if you had cleared each day the area on which you lay down, your work would have advanced slowly and you would not have lost heart.” The son did what his father said, and in a short time the plot was cultivated.

I’m forgetting about the end times. I am not sure how long it could take to cultivate earth, our own plot, even with the grace of God. I am sure, however, that I will do what I can, and witness to the gospel, only if I am willing to accept that the ground must be dug up locally, one kindness, one intervention, one time when I say what I really think, one quiet vote cast at a time.