

Messianic ministers

By [Michael Pasquerello III](#)

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During almost 20 years of pastoral ministry I have served three different congregations that experienced such long-term decline and loss that it seemed as if the “end of the world” was upon us: they had lost recognition in the community, members, ministries and their passion for mission. But the loss that was talked about most often was the loss of financial resources.

Each of the congregations had gone to the bishop pleading for a new, young “messianic” minister who would have the right personality, know the right things, possess the right skills, make the right moves and cast the right vision. The goal was to miraculously reverse a 20- to 30-year decline, restoring the congregation to an earlier age of youthful energy, ample resources, community standing, thriving membership.

In this week’s Gospel lesson, Jesus doesn’t seem to fit the bill. Folks wanted a pastor who would save them from the seemingly inevitable “end” of their world. When the disciples point to the impressive beauty and splendor of the temple, Jesus announces it will be destroyed, flattened into rubble. He describes a scenario that only moves from bad to worse, with a list of doomsday happenings that would signal the end of anyone’s world. He then shifts the focus, telling the disciples the end is not theirs to know; but that creation’s true end—God and God’s rule—is assured.

I have been discussing this lesson with members of my preaching class. They agree there would be no need to make this text relevant for Christians living in other places around the world, since it depicts conditions and circumstances that they know well, and a “world” in which they already live. One student suggested the greatest challenge for preaching this lesson in many North American congregations would be the “irrelevant” label they might attach to its strange, apocalyptic scenario. This initiated a discussion on how to proclaim the Word found in the text

without reducing it to therapeutic sentimentality, end-time curiosity or postmodern despair.

It occurred to me that this might be a good picture of our call to faithful obedience. It is Jesus who stands at the center of this lesson—and at the center of the church in the world—calling us to “go on” bearing witness with the wisdom he provides. He gives us the assurance of his continued care, and the promise that by standing firm we will “see” the fullness of God’s kingdom.

Many voices call us to heroic action—to start a movement, summon passion for this or that agenda, seize the opportunity for “making a difference.” Jesus calls us to “remember the future”—the communion of holy love we have been called to share with the whole company of saints. It is his words that strengthen us to be patient, hopeful and fruitful, orienting our vision towards God’s kingdom as the fulfillment of not only the church but of the whole creation.

As Samuel Wells writes, “To be a saint does not require one to have outstanding gifts or talents. All is required is that one employ all the resources of the church’s tradition ... rather than create them for one’s self, and that one long for the glory of the church’s destiny ... rather than assuming one must achieve it oneself” (*Improvisation: the Drama of Christian Ethics*).