

November 17, Ordinary 33C (Luke 21:5-19)

## **Jesus' hearers are well-acquainted with calamity and crisis.**

by [Yvette Schock](#) in the [November 6, 2019](#) issue

Since he was very young, my son has been fascinated by all things related to construction. For a while, I thought it might be just a phase, possibly induced by the relentless parade of dump trucks and diggers on pajamas, T-shirts, shoes, sheets, backpacks, and virtually every other product labeled “boys.” But his interest has stuck. As we travel our daily routes, he plays a never-ending game of I Spy with himself, scanning the scene for cranes, caution tape, and traffic barrels—and searching for those unmistakable orange and black road signs. He is not yet a reader, but he has come to recognize certain signs. “That says ‘Bump,’” he declares confidently. “Look, there’s ‘Road Work Ahead.’” When he sees an unfamiliar sign, he shouts urgently, worried that we’ll pass it by before I can read it: “Mom, what’s that sign? Hurry, hurry!”

When Jesus stands in the temple in Jerusalem and declares that it will one day be reduced to scattered stones, those who hear him are immediately alarmed—but they don’t seem surprised. Jesus’ hearers are well acquainted with calamity and crisis. They can readily imagine sudden disaster, can imagine even the destruction of the temple—the place of God’s presence at the center of the people and the nation. So they don’t waste time wringing their hands or wondering why or how such devastation might come. They just want to know when it will be coming. What are the signs?

Luke was likely written late in the first century, after the siege and destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. So the earliest readers of this text had likely seen the devastation Jesus envisions in “the days to come.” Like Jesus’ hearers in the story, Luke’s readers could easily imagine disaster knocking on the door.

I remember discussing the subject of apocalypse one day in my Gospels class in seminary. A friend commented that in his predominantly African American

community, when a young man sees the merry-go-round of red and blue lights in his rearview mirror, it's an apocalyptic moment—saturated with a sense of inescapable, immediate, existential threat. I think there are people in every time and place for whom the days to come are now.

In our Gospel story, people hear Jesus' warning about the coming disaster and ask him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" How does Jesus answer their questions? How does he respond to their grief and anxiety?

Jesus' first response is to caution them, as they seek comfort and guidance, to be wary of false prophets. It's a threat that the Bible notes again and again: after Moses' death, in Jeremiah's time, in the early Christian communities that Paul writes to. We may recognize the proclamations of false prophets in our own time. Sometimes they offer easy answers and false hope. Sometimes they accuse falsely, claiming to know the cause of the present crisis. (Often it is people from *over there*, people who are *not us*.) Or they might claim to know the end of a story that is still unfolding. Jesus warns his followers, "do not go after them."

Next Jesus echoes so many messengers of God sent in times of trouble: do not be afraid. Often this word of comfort comes to prepare a person for action. Jesus is clear about the "dreadful portents" that are coming, but he urges his listeners to resist the panic of fear that incites us to flee or fight. "Do not be terrified," Jesus urges, for "this will give you an opportunity to testify . . . I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict."

The faithful will neither give false hope nor make false accusations. They will respond to persecution and accusations with wisdom. What is this wisdom that none "will be able to withstand or contradict?" Perhaps it is the wisdom of God that Paul describes: "We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:23–24).

When my son sees a work crew or a bucket truck or excavator, he'll often ask, "What are they doing there, Mom? What are they building?" Most of the time I have to answer, "I don't know—what do you think they are building?" When I look at a construction site, I don't have the eyes to see what is taking shape there. But he does. Sometimes his vision of what is being built is inspired by concrete details he

observes; sometimes it is grounded only in his imagination. But he sees it.

Jesus' answer to his listeners' questions is not simple. It is not a checklist or a road map to help them navigate the days to come. It gives license neither for blind optimism nor for doomsday preparations. But it does contain a promise: the faithful will be called to witness, and when they are, God will be present and at work. In the midst of every kind of trouble, they will be called to witness because they will see what God is building, even then.