

November 28, Advent 1C (Luke 21:25-36)

What if Jesus is snatching us out of our desire for another world?

by [Willie Dwayne Francois III](#) in the [November 17, 2021](#) issue

Life is fragile. We live under the looming threat of real-world collapses. In Afghanistan, what took 20 years and \$80 billion for the United States to build collapsed in days. It's common to reach for things to shield us from the terror of our awareness that everything can end without notice, like a vapor. Jesus says, "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap."

These words, placed on Jesus' tongue, suggest a chronological expectation. But his immediate audience did not see the events described in any literal sense. In ancient imagination, "the roaring and tossing of the sea" symbolized an existential category of chaos. Unless historians missed it, that age passed into the next without the heavens shaking, the celestial bodies emitting irregularities, or the Son of Man surfing the clouds in unvarnished power. Jerusalem fell, and the Roman Empire met its demise, but the world of nations continued with its mass proliferation of inequality, violence, and exploitation.

What if the symbolism of Jesus' depiction of hopeful chaos is not about some distant time of ultimate endings? What if Jesus is snatching us out of our desire for another world by asking us to face the jarring details of this one? I see Jesus making a case about the fragility of life and the fierce need for people of faith to show up each day with stamina and courage.

A lack of awareness of our finitude pushes us to act in ways opposed to the call to abundant life in the here and now. For some Christians, salvation amounts to an escape from the present; it feeds a narcissistic need for longevity beyond the limits of existence. The fragility of life leads some of us to fumble around for meaning, leaving us satisfied with a hope based on ontological exclusivity. We run away from the terrors of our eternal now by out-believing, out-praying, out-worshipping, out-do-

gooding those who are not like us, all as preconditions to live again in some great by-and-by.

This can produce a destructive sort of leave-it-to-Jesus logic. If the only prospect for justice and liberation we can see is tied to a parousia, this deeply harms the quality of our life together. There is no time to wait, staring into the sky with our hands tied behind our backs as child hunger looms, the racial wealth gap persists, and gender-based violence grows. If we leave it exclusively to Jesus, the frailty of existence on our vulnerable globe will continue to worsen. A second coming is not the answer to structural racism or the dangerous momentum of infectious disease. Our hope for peace and equity should not be relegated entirely to a sudden, cosmic in-breaking of Jesus into the world.

What if now, paradoxically both fragile and eternal, is all you have? Benjamin E. Mays, whom Randal Maurice Jelks called the schoolmaster of the civil rights movement, is oft-quoted on the Morehouse College campus: “I have only just a minute, / Only 60 seconds in it. . . . / Didn’t seek it, didn’t choose it. / But it’s up to me / to use it. . . . Just a tiny little minute, / but eternity is in it.”

We cannot waste the power and potential of the eternal now. For H. Richard Niebuhr, eternity is less the action of God before time or the life with God after time than it is the presence of God in time. Eternal life is a quality of existence as we journey in the flesh.

Jesus, the carpenter who accepted the complexities of his identity, models and inaugurates what Paul Tillich calls “the New Being” in our time and our lives. The New Being, our sense of eternal life now, offers us a resilient capacity to respond to the contradictions, insecurities, and problems cascading toward us. To follow the carpenter and his teachings means to own the work of justice and abolition as a manifestation of our collective and personal eternity amid a crumbling world. Empowered by the words of Jesus that will “never pass away,” people of the Way must respond to life as if now is all there is, greeting each morning with an unequivocal yes to a vocation of liberation for all. The legacy of the Jesus movement turns on our mutual work to liberate the unprotected from the violence of oppressors and to free oppressors from their own privilege and oppression.

This Advent occasions some time to probe how we are dooming ourselves and the world with our mismanagement of the eternity nestled deep in time. An answer to

the swelling and disruptive fragility of life involves embracing our interdependence with the rest of creation. The smallness we feel functions as a gift to put us in touch with each other and the whole created order. The natural world is reeling, waiting for us to accept our oneness as an indicator of salvation.

Deadly pathogens and devastating storms are not the tools of God trying to introduce the end of creation, but they are consequences of our dereliction of accountability to humanity, the earth, and God. We can no longer afford the exorbitant costs of wasting our eternal now.