

A sermon for the Episcopal Parish of the Epiphany in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas James Brown, on Sunday, 14 November 2010, based upon Luke 21:5-19, Proper 28C.

Many of you know T.S. Eliot's poem, "East Coker," which begins, "In my beginning is my end" and concludes: "In my end is my beginning."

The great Biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann, warns that, "all this talk in the Bible about the end-time is intellectually difficult and pastorally problematic. End-time talk, which permeates the New Testament, is deeply incongruous with our intellectual world. Besides, none of us wants to sound like a religious crazy."

Our texts this morning are examples of Biblical eschatology, which is the theological word for the study of end things. Isaiah's prophecy was addressed to a community of people who had lived for a generation in another country as captives, exiles. In fact, the people who read this poem were born in Babylon. They had never seen Jerusalem. All they knew was what they heard about Mt. Zion, the stunning temple, the marble and gold, the shops, the streets, the houses. Now they had returned, and it was nothing like what they had been told. It was all rubble. The Temple was leveled, burned, and destroyed.

That's the situation to which the prophet writes: For I am about to create a new heaven and a new earth . . . I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it.

Those words inspired a few visionary people, people of hope and courage, who raised their heads and saw God's powerful energy creating something new—a new future, a new hope, a new world, and they rolled up their sleeves and went to work to build that new future.

In the Gospel lesson, five centuries after Isaiah, Jesus predicts the destruction of Jerusalem again, including the unthinkable prediction that the Temple, the same one his ancestors lovingly and carefully rebuilt, would again be destroyed. In 70 AD, a few years before Luke wrote his gospel, the Romans did indeed lay siege to Jerusalem, leveled the Temple, and kicked everybody out. Christians were hunted down, arrested and executed. But Jesus, Luke reports, had said, "You will be hated because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

What does it mean to have hope when things look hopeless?

Nothing in history, at least in my mind, has challenged more strenuously the conviction that there's a God than the Holocaust. And I'm not sure one has ever struggled with the theological implications more honestly and publicly than the brilliant Jewish author, Elie Wiesel, who survived Auschwitz, but witnessed the death there of his own father, family, and friends. Wiesel, over the years, in novels and essays, has expressed doubts about God's existence in any meaningful way, and he's expressed anger and rage at God, and at his people for believing in God.

A few years ago, at Rosh Hashanah, he wrote a prayer. Let me read part of it for you: Master of the Universe, let us make up. It is time. How long can we go on being angry? More than fifty years have passed since the nightmare was lifted. Gratitude has replaced bitterness, and we are thankful to anyone

willing to hear our tales and become our ally in the battle against apathy and forgetfulness. For us every moment is grace.

Even in the death camps, prayers were said, hymns were sung, faith in God was affirmed; and even there, even in the darkest valley of the shadow of death, hope lived.

The basic message of the Bible is that no matter what is happening, no matter how bad things look, even when we're overcome by suffering, facing death itself, God the Creator is still God, and because of that, there is a better day coming. God is not bent on destroying the world in one final, fiery holocaust! God loves the world and God calls us to co-create with God a reign of peace and justice, of kindness and compassion. Jerusalem will be rebuilt. There will be a new heaven and a new earth. The message of the Bible is that God's goodness remains, regardless of bad things that happen in the world, or for us personally.

People who believe this become people of hope and courage; people who don't give up. Those who do are the same ones who keep hoping and working for a safer world, for fewer guns, for better schools, for more and better health care, and for an economic system which extends its bounty to everyone, not just those of us who were born into it.

People of hope will be discouraged on occasion, but not paralyzed by depression; we'll hear God's promise and keep building a church that's faithful, and as inclusive as Jesus was.

In her book, *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris has an essay on eschatology in which she explains the focus on the end of things, but also her experience that what we Christians believe about the end causes us to live lives of strong hope now. She illustrates this by telling about a friend, a brilliant scholar, stricken with cancer, over a period of several years of surgery and chemotherapy, who almost died three times. Then, suddenly, the cancer went into remission. Her future is uncertain, to say the least, but she has returned to teaching and writing. This is what she said: "I'd never want to go back because I know what each morning means and I'm so grateful just to be alive. We've been through so much together. And hasn't it been a blessing!" Norris concludes, "That's eschatology."

We believe in God's son, Jesus Christ, who experienced the worst life could be, who died, and who rose again to free us for lives of courage and hope.

We believe, as the poet put it, that "Our beginning is our end," and, "our end is our beginning."