

Changing the Question

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Two pastors were standing by the side of the road one day, holding up a large homemade sign that said “The End is Near! Turn yourself around now before it’s too late!” A car approached, and the driver rolled down his window yelling “Take a hike, you religious nuts!” before speeding off down the road. A few seconds later, at the sound of screeching tires and a giant splash, one of the pastors said to the other, “Do you think, instead, we should have just written ‘The Bridge Is Out?’”

Religious people are notorious for pointing to the end of times. Some draw our attention to Israel’s regeneration, restoration, and regathering as signs the end is near, while others point to the book of Daniel (Dan. 12:4) and speak of increased travel and knowledge. Then there is the Bible translation argument. All these translations, they say, suggest the great commission is complete, not to mention pandemics, nuclear war conversations, severity of natural disasters, and the earth’s warming are all pointing to Jesus’ second coming.

Everywhere we turn someone is pointing out that end times are near, including the non-religious. From last year’s Great Recession in 2021 to 2022’s quiet quitting, it seems ambition is lost. People are giving up and wondering if this is it. And I think they are all right, not about the giving up part, but the end of times.

In our passage this morning, Jesus suggests as much himself, mentioning three signs: false messiahs and false calculations of times, wars and international conflicts, and natural disasters with cosmic terror. What Jesus is saying is that when the world is coming to an end, it will affect not just Israel, but all nations, not just the nations, but the entire cosmos.¹ Then after going through this litany of things to come, after telling the disciples that the temple is about to fall, notice what Jesus does not say: “You better get yourself right with God.” Nor does he say “Here is a three-step prayer to pray.” He does not even ask “Do you know where you are going when this occurs?” Instead, Jesus says, “Don’t worry about the signs.” God will worry about that. For you, for the church, the most important thing to do *“is to bear witness.”* I wonder what it would be like in the year 2023 for the church to take on such a task as to bear witness?

I think it would begin with the church changing her question. Over the past 30 years, and especially over the past 3 years, we have been plagued with the same question. The question comes from a well-meaning place. It’s a question often asked with tears in our eyes, but it has proven to have been the wrong question. Instead of asking “What do we do to get folks back to church?” Presbyterian pastor Adam Bornemann suggests the church ask “What’s the Holy Spirit doing in peoples lives, in our community, and how do we come alongside that?”²

If we start with bearing witness with such a daring question, be prepared, Jesus says, to encounter suffering. Jesus warns his disciples that they will be persecuted.

What Jesus is saying to them and to us is that those who love God so much don't care who knows or how much it will cost or how unpopular it makes them or how much it endangers their lives. Sam Wells argues that this type of faith that Jesus is calling us to is a faith that follows through the implications of Christ's love to the very end. It's a faith that does not duck the logic of the gospel, a faith that never tires, even in the face of hostility or when the world is ready to give up, even when it gets messy or requires vulnerability and sight.³

This suffering will not only be our own, but our neighbors as well. Changing our question to "how do we come alongside our community" means that we will follow Jesus to the suffering next door. Here Jesus invites us in and asks us to stay and bear witness.

Laurie Anderson, in her young adult novel *Wintergirls*, tells the story about Lia, a teenager struggling with anorexia. With her parents dealing with a divorce and her best friend gone, Lia's struggles go unnoticed by those who walk beside her every day, even though her body mass gradually begins to waste away. She comes up with reasons to miss out on dinner at home and skip out on the cafeteria at school. Her family, her teachers, and her friends avoid seeing her pain because pain comes with uncertainty.⁴

Suffering suggests the end of times because there are *not* quick solutions to suffering. Lia's life is messy. Her troubles are messy. All the people in her life, all the people who surround her each day, don't see her and therefore cannot show her the infectious mercy that our community desires. Without mercy no one is there to help her—no mercy...no connection, no connection...no care, no care...no hope.

Earlier this month, the American Psychological Association released a study recommending that every adult in the U.S. under the age of 65 should be screened for anxiety disorders, and adults of any age should be checked for depression. The study went on to say that more than 30% of adults reported having symptoms of anxiety disorder or depression this summer.

I wonder how many of the people within our community are facing the same symptoms. I wonder how many feel as if these are signs that their end is near. I wonder how many of us here this morning can relate. I wonder what it would look like for a church to not run from such suffering but to encounter it and ask how we come alongside you. I would imagine changing the question to how do we come alongside our community would require us to get pretty good at improv.

Jesus tells his disciples to make up their minds not to prepare your defense in advance, for I will give you the words and wisdom. This improvisation that Jesus calls us to, for most of us, is scary, scary because we like to be in control, scary because we think we need to be clever, scary because we couldn't imagine not preparing. However, this is where most of us get it wrong about improvisation. Improv does not mean we have to be clever or that it must come from within or that we wing it without preparation. Actually, it is just the opposite. Improv with Jesus means that it never only comes from us or has anything to do with being clever. Nor is it about getting it right in some predetermined way. Instead improv always relies on full participation and the phrase *yes...and*.

In an interview, Marthame Sanders, a pastor, producer and Improv actor, argues that in improv, the maxim of *yes...and* is a bedrock. “That is, whatever a fellow player offers, I will acknowledge its truth and then add to it. It’s not automatic agreement; that’s co-dependence, not trust. Rather the goal is to say ‘yes’ to the truth of the offer. For example, a player pretends to hand me a baby, and I change it to a bowling ball; I have denied the truth of the scene. I have undercut any trust the player might have in me. On the other hand, if I accept the baby as fact, then I can add a detail that deepens the scene. It creates mutual trust, which leads to collaborative discovery and eventually beautiful risks.”⁵

This *yes...and* is a parallel in our faith. We are commanded to love our neighbor. That is our *yes*, not a reflexive agreement with whatever they say or do. With this *yes*, there is still conflict or different opinions over sanctuary carpet, politics, theology even. Instead, *yes* affirms another’s image of God. The *and* implies a movement that will change both parties by the encounter even when there is conflict. The initial *yes* of God’s love then the *and* that deepens the relationship when the church seeks to take the initiative to live this kind of mutual reality together will build trust, create new discoveries, and move us alongside our sisters and brothers with faithful risks.

And Jesus says we can do this without worrying about our words, because in reality, our words don’t matter a whole lot. If we as a church are serious about transforming our question, if we are serious about walking with Jesus alongside our community, then our transformation, the transformation of the community, is not relying on our words. It is relying on the act of doing, the act of following the one whom we believe to be God in bodily form. Our faith becomes real, our wholeness becomes real, and our transformation becomes real when this is embodied.

I think this is why Jesus goes through this litany of horrid events. What Jesus is doing is reminding us that life on this side of heaven is often made up of unfortunate incidents. These incidents are not God’s punishments nor are they God’s will to mark the end times. These events are from the acts of people, by the acts of us all within this world.

If we want to be a vital church of the twenty-first century, then we must change the question, and for the church, changing the question begins in this room. It is in this room that we become prepared. This is where God calls us to practice each week. It is in this room where we learn to be vulnerable with one another and with God, where the Holy Spirit teaches us how to recognize our suffering and the suffering of others. It’s in this room where we learn to connect with and care for one another so that we are prepared to connect and care for others out there. It is in this room where we learn to recognize the love, grace, forgiveness, mercy, hope, and the joy of the Kingdom of God.

If we are not coming to worship together, if we are not opening up scripture and reading it together in small groups or Sunday School, then how will we recognize the joy of the Kingdom of God? How will we be able to defer from the false witnesses from God’s Kingdom? How will we be able to point to God’s hope and joy amongst all of the suffering of this world?

In a world of self-indulgence and scarcity, how will we survive speaking about an abundant love that is available for all? Will we have a story to witness other than the End of Times tale this world so cheaply offers? How will we be prepared to navigate within these two spaces of suffering and joy? To be a Christian in the twenty-first century is to improvise between these two spaces—the space of walking alongside the suffering of the world and the joy of God’s Kingdom. To put it in Easter terms, the suffering we encounter is the cross, and the joy we encounter is the resurrection. The space in between is our home on earth. This represents the pathos that some say is the end times and the joy that we call our heavenly home. It is in this space where we will find Jesus.

What will it mean for the church to change her question? It means that the closer we get to suffering, the closer we get to the Kingdom of God. Or the closer we get to the cross, the closer we get to the resurrection. For those of us who find ourselves closer to the cross than to resurrection this morning, we are not alone. In this room, in this space, it is safe to say so. Find someone and tell them. And for those who find themselves closer to resurrection than the cross, we are happy for you. Now find someone who is not. Don’t worry if you do not think you are prepared. God has been preparing you your whole life.

It’s time for all of us to stop limiting ourselves to just part of the gospel, the suffering of the end times or the joy within the Kingdom of God. It’s time for the church to live the whole Gospel to dwell between suffering and joy where the cross meets the resurrection. This is where we meet Jesus. This is what Christianity is. This is what it means to live it.⁶ If we even try to do that, to dwell there, then without even realizing it, the question will be changed, and we will find ourselves walking alongside God, our community, and one another.

Notes

¹ Fred Craddock, “Luke,” *Interpretations* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), page 244.

² Adam Bornemann, “Freeing Ourselves from Faulty Assumptions,” <https://mministry.org/freeing-ourselves-from-faulty-assumptions-and-short-sighted-questions/>.

³ Sam Wells, “Dwelling in the Comma,” Duke Chapel, January 30, 2011.

⁴ Laurie Anderson, *Wintergirls* (New York: Penguin Group, 2009).

⁵ An interview of Mathane Sanders by Lyle Garrity (A Sanctified Art) posted by Columbia Theological Seminary, <https://www.ctsnet.edu/yes-wholehearted-guest-rev-marthame-sanders%E2%80%A2%E2%80%A2/>.

⁶ I am thankful for Sam Wells and his “Dwelling in the Comma,” Duke Chapel, January 30, 2011, as it impacted my theology and the ending of this sermon.