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Luke 21:5-19
Georgetown Presbyterian Church

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Opportunity to Testify
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Tuesday night was a blood moon. The total lunar eclipse seemed to bring darkness to the very bright sky of the full moon. The Sun, the earth, and the moon were all perfectly aligned, and the shadow of the earth from the sun's light covered the moon, leaving it in a darkened and reddened state. Given the midterm elections coinciding exactly with the blood moon's appearance, this was a perfect time to assume all the things Jesus had predicted were finally going to happen – the end was neigh. Based on what some of the politicians were saying it really did seem like the world might end on Tuesday! Someone confessed to me that their plan for election night was just to take a sleeping pill and wake up in the morning and see if the world had ended or not.

During the colonial period, an eclipse of the sun caught members of a New England state legislature off guard while they were in session. These good New Englanders knew their Bibles. Luke 21, verse 25, "There will be signs in the sun..." The legislature descended into panic, and somebody made a motion to adjourn. If the world was about to end, what did legislation matter? But one wise member of the body rose and made the following memorable little speech. "Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I choose to be found doing my duty. I move, sir, let candles be brought."

Solar eclipse, lunar eclipse or not, the undeniable fact, is that our individual lives, indeed the life of the world, is delicate and vulnerable. It is simply true that the end is always potentially at hand. There is lots of literature in the Bible about just that subject – the end times. Apocalyptic texts are used heavily in some Christian traditions to compel Christians to behave in certain ways and to analyze signs of things happening in the world to predict when the end is truly at hand. But Joseph Fytzmeyer, a Luke scholar, says that he believes these end times texts were written less to change people's behavior and more to give people hope.

He writes, "Worshippers in the modern world will trip all over the "foreign "language of the apocalyptic in this discourse. Since apocalyptic literature "grew up in an Old Testament matrix as a form of persecution-literature, intended to give hope to the persecuted." These holy yet strange stories painted a picture of a world filled with chaos, but Jesus wanted to understand that in the midst of all of it God was still the center.

In 1993, the original book *Chicken Soup for the Soul* appeared in bookstores and one of them found its way to me. I was in 7th grade and my world was definitely coming to an end. I was moving away from a town that I loved where I had lots of friends and a great community. My family was moving to a new city, and I had to begin my middle school as the new kid on the block. To add injury to insult, during one of the first weeks of school I broke my leg and did not get to play sports, which was the way that I was planning to make friends. So now I was the new kid on crutches with only my annoying brothers to sign my cast. The blood moon had covered the sky. Without any friends or sports, I had lots of time to read this book. It was filled with short stories of people who had made lemonade out of lemons. People who had been through truly difficult things with their health or in wars or in poverty or even in just moving to a new town and not having any friends. I could relate to these pithy stories because they were stories of things getting

better. Each of the experiences of the people in the book became an opportunity to testify to new days and new chapters and new perspectives. And honestly, that little book helped me.

Jesus says, when the world seems to be ending, when everything is going wrong, when there are wars and earthquakes, and people are against you, and your family is a mess and nothing is working out – then remember that Jesus, the son of God, predicted all of this. And Jesus, the Son of God, gave us some advice, “Do Not Panic.” He was more articulate than that, he said by your endurance you will gain your souls. That was his advice about handling persecution and destruction and turmoil. By your endurance you will gain your souls. The character of the word he is using is not just patience, but it is more a persistent endurance. Amid all the things that can go wrong in the world, the center will hold, so carry on with persistence, courage, and hope.

The poet W.H. Auden once wrote how every traumatic experience in our life is not an accident but is in fact a necessity. I do not agree with this statement that every traumatic experience is necessary, but I do believe that we all face trials and traumas of different shapes and sizes and through these experiences we can discover new things about ourselves and about meaning in our lives. Through our own experiences with struggle, we can uncover new insights, we can grow in compassion, we can add depth to our character. It does not mean that God intended the struggle, wanted the hard thing to happen, or was trying to teach us a lesson – bad theology tells us those things. Good theology tells us that just like Jesus predicted, temple gets destroyed, lives get upturned, people fight and things fall apart and yet still there is hope in the future. God is not done with us. All is not lost. The center will hold because the center is Jesus.

William Butler Yeats in his poem *The Second Coming* has a line, “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold.” The poem is written from Ireland in 1919, World War I had just ended. Yeats’ assessment of the situation was bleak. The signs of the times were pointing to a future of perpetual turmoil and chaos and a general breakdown of society. He used the image of a falcon flying in a widening spiral, higher and higher and higher until it could no longer look down to see its falconers outstretched arm. Without the falconer in sight, it cannot return home. Without that connection, it is lost.

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

Yeats looked to the signs of the time and assumed it was all pointing to the end of the world. Yeats’ bleak prediction was that all was lost. Yet the difference between the Yeats predictions and those of Jesus is that Yeats believed the center would not hold, while Jesus ensures it will.

If these texts are indeed intended to give hope to people who are in the struggle, then we must be bolstered by Jesus predicting all this unrest would occur and yet believing his followers could

endure it. Jesus did not believe they would be lost in the middle of the storm – rather that in the storm, by their faith, they would find their way to the object of all hope. ‘By your endurance you will gain your soul.’

Creation is resilient and that means we are resilient. We can get through tough seasons. We can move to new places. We can endure awful losses. We can pick up the pieces and get back up from things that have knocked us down. We can even handle the pain of death, our own and those we hold most dear. Because through all these things, though flying in ever widening circles, God’s voice can always be heard. God’s call will always be strong. And God’s pure and divine love for creation will always claim us. By your endurance in the faith, you will gain your souls. Be of good courage; the center will hold.

Thanks be to God. Amen.