Really Good News
A Homily for 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

Back in 1936 a British Statesman was quoted as saying, “there was a Chinese curse … saying, ‘May you live in interesting times.’ There is no doubt that the curse has fallen on us.” Maybe this quote is relevant today, for we seem to be living in “interesting times” of global terrorism, an ongoing battle against ISIS, a sluggish economy, and a contentious election that has left many feeling angry, lost and worried about our country’s future; and the list goes on.

Many of us come to Mass to hear words of comfort and get away from the pain and trials of daily life. But instead, today we hear from the prophet Malachi about the blazing fire of God’s judgment and from Jesus’ own mouth predictions of war and insurrection, famines and plagues, and promises of persecution even by our own families. It’s enough to make a person want to tune out today’s Gospel, like what I do with most evening news broadcasts. But please don’t. Today’s scriptures are in fact words of comfort. They are REALLY GOOD NEWS. And here it is in a nutshell: in the great cosmic scheme of things, God has already won the victory over evil and we can trust that Jesus is always with us, especially during our darkest hours.

Today’s scriptures are difficult because they are apocalyptic writing. We need to be careful how we interpret what we hear today. The word ‘apocalypse’ simply means a lifting of the veil, a revelation, a vision of heavenly secrets that help us make sense of earthly realities today. The author of Luke’s Gospel is neither predicting the future nor giving us “signs” of the end time. Luke is interpreting the crisis that Christian communities faced in the years 80-85 A.D., and giving these events an enduring and eternal meaning.

We must consider the context within which the Gospel of Luke is being written. Jesus has already died, risen, and ascended; Peter, Paul and James have already been martyred, and the city and Temple of Jerusalem are already destroyed, and a Jewish insurrection against Rome has been ruthlessly crushed. And most important to Luke are problems of harassment and persecution in early Christian communities primarily by local Jewish synagogue leaders.

Luke’ Gospel uses this backdrop to speak to people of all ages. Think about it. Has there ever been an age that has not seen wars, disease (Ebola or Zika virus) natural disaster (hurricane Matthew)? And has there ever been a time when a true Christian has not been ridiculed and rejected, whether by friends, family, or state? Today’s “interesting times” are not unique, and are not signs of the end times.

The enduring good news is a message of comfort and encouragement for Christians of all ages to help us face our world today with confidence and hope. The prophet Malachi speaks to a Jewish community that had returned from exile in Babylon and is having a rough go of it. They are living in a time where evil doers seemed to prosper at the expense of other. And God speaks to His people through the prophet encouraging them to stand firm in the practice of their faith because the day of the Lord is coming in which God will purify the faithful, healing us with the rays of the “sun of justice.”

This term, “Sun of Justice,” for Christians has always referred to Jesus. So when Jesus tells his disciples, when you hear of or experience “interesting times,” like resurrection and war, “do not be terrified,” he is echoing an important message of apocalyptic literature: the present evil age will come to an end through a powerful intervention from God. But Jesus expands this message. His life, death and resurrection is precisely the beginning of this intervention. Despite what it may look like on a day-to-day basis, the triumph of good is inevitable and on-going. Although not yet complete, the outcome is
certain: God will, in his own time and way, bring good out of evil. God’s justice will triumph. God’s love is stronger than all our sins, and even stronger than death itself. We are not to be afraid of today, or tomorrow, not any day. Not the day of our own death, and especially not Judgment Day. This is REALLY GOOD NEWS.

But there is more here. Today Jesus is also assuring us, through the words he spoke to his disciples, that not only is the Cosmic Plan on track, but in the interim time before it is complete He will be present to his faithful followers to comfort and guide them in times of trouble. He is present to us as we face whatever concerns weigh us down: natural disaster, politics and war or the struggles of married life and raising children, the physical struggles of aging or that diagnosis we weren’t expecting. And yes, He will deliver us from these difficulties. But “To deliver” does not always mean that God will miraculously make it all better now. The prodigal child may not come home, the cancer may continue to grow, and the marriage may fail.

The promise is that through it all Jesus walks with us. And the only guarantee of our faith, for the present day, is the inner peace that comes from knowing this. As Jesus told his disciples in the upper room after his resurrection, “Peace be with you.” Understanding this promise Jesus leaves us is all the wisdom we need to face any adversity, no matter what form it takes. Do not be afraid, stand confident in the promises of our faith, because the peace of Christ will descend on us and stay with us when we need it most.

I’m not speaking here from some theology text book or scholarly scripture commentary. I’ve experienced this kind of peace, especially in the days that followed the death of our son in June 2014. And I’ve spoken to many other who have had this same experience of an unexplainable sense of peace that descends on us and stays with us through the hard times of grief and sorry. It’s as if Jesus is speaking directly to our souls, saying “I know you are struggling, but trust me, I’ve got this.”

And I know from experience that the source and greatest power of this sense of peace come to me the Sunday following our son’s death. It came in the reception of the body and blood of Christ, the foundation of the absolute certitude that in God’s plan my life is precious, and in receiving his body and blood that my struggle became his struggle too, and Jesus’ victory over death in also my victory over death and whatever evil times I would face today, tomorrow, or any day.

So, I know it’s true. And I also know, it’s not easy. And I think therefore Paul’s message to the Thessalonians. Because walking with Jesus through the hardest days of our lives requires us to be patient and lovingly persistent: lovingly persistent as we continue our good works of prayer and worship even when it doesn’t seem God is listening; lovingly persistent as we continue our good works for justice and peace in a world that rejects it; lovingly persistent in living a simple Christian life of love that will be a good example to others even when it seems evil doers are still thriving.

We continue to walk through our darkest days with Jesus because we know in the end it is only together that we can overcome these evil times. We cannot do it by our own power but only when the words and wisdom of Jesus live within us. And when we hit rock bottom on that darkest day of our lives, we remember the words Jesus says today, “but not a hair on your head will be destroyed. By your perseverance you will secure you lives.”

And these, my friends are words of comfort

They are REALLY GOOD NEWS!