

## Hope Can Be Hard Work

Today's Gospel forces me to make a confession. When Jesus said "nation will rise against nation," I always imagined he meant two different nations waging war against each other. It only recently dawned on me that "nation rising against nation" might mean a nation doing battle against itself. Now that the midterm elections are over, though, and the results are trickling in, I'm astonished by how narrow many of the margins of victory are. Candidates and policies that seem to me to be the only correct choices were rejected by roughly half of my fellow citizens. Not everything on the ballot was equally important – it probably doesn't matter all that much whether Maryland's courts are renamed or not. But I'll admit to praying fervently for certain outcomes in this election. And, even as I did, some other devout Christian – a friend, a neighbor, a colleague, even a family member – was undoubtedly praying just as passionately for the opposite result. Confronted with so much frantic fervor, what does God want us to do?

We can begin by considering Jesus's admonitions this morning. When his followers admire the Temple, Jesus predicts quite matter-of-factly that it will be completely demolished. This already happened once before, when the Babylonians captured Jerusalem, tore down the Temple of Solomon and took the Hebrew people into a forced exile that lasted for generations. The Temple that Jesus's followers praise is a replacement, less splendid than Solomon's original but still a magnificent edifice. Hearing that it, too, will be destroyed – as it was by the Romans in 70 C.E. – must make Jesus's followers feel like the end of the world is at hand. And, as fearful mortals always do, they ask for a sign to alert them when the disaster is about to happen.

Jesus ignores their request. Instead, he warns them against false prophets and instructs them not to fear when all manner of awful things occur. He tells them, again matter-of-factly,

that they will be persecuted and even executed for following him. But he also assures them that, by their endurance, they will gain their souls. Honestly, Jesus, isn't there an easier way?

Honestly? There isn't. The wars, famines, plagues, natural disasters and persecutions that Jesus describes are standard-issue apocalyptic events. They're also facts of life, and always have been. Looking for signs of the end of the world is an utter waste of time and attention, because this world is always coming to an end one way or another.

But this world is also always being reborn, and God is always bringing new beauty out of the ashes and into the light. The Babylonian Exile devastated the Hebrew people – we need only read the Book of Lamentations to see how traumatized they were. But it also spread them into new lands where they could share their culture and their God with people who wouldn't have known them otherwise. Jesus's own arrest, torture and murder at the hands of the Roman Empire may well be the single most horrifying thing that ever happened in all of human history. *We killed our God.* What could be worse? But without Jesus's death there could have been no Resurrection, the miracle of love that reconciled humanity to God and became the foundation of a faith that has brought meaning and hope into the lives of billions.

There's a lot we still don't know about the outcome of this election; even after all the results are in, we still won't know how they'll play out in the months and years to come. But we do know that, no matter what happens, this isn't the end of the world. God will bring goodness out of our circumstances, because God always does. As Christians, it's our job to put aside our fear and anger, stop trying to tell God how to shape the future, and trust that the Holy Spirit is with us as we do the work of Christ's church. It's our job to *hope*. And while hope can be hard work, we cannot falter. Enduring in hope, we will gain our souls and, in God's good time, all will be well. *Amen.*