

A Sharp Contrast

Scripture: Luke 21:5 – 19 & Isaiah 65:17 – 25

Let us start this message by sharing a story about whitewater rafting. I have gone whitewater rafting on the Leigh River in PA but I would not consider it a 'true' whitewater rafting experience. The Leigh River only had level one rapids. I have always wanted to go whitewater rafting on a level three river (The highest there is!) like the New River in WV or the Colorado River in CO. On a level three whitewater rafting trip, you are almost guaranteed to be tossed from the raft!

Our story today – Before entering into a level three whitewater rafting river, a group of rafters had to practice to follow the commands of the guide who would be in their boat. In the practice area, the guide said – *Everybody on right side of raft, give me three strong forward strokes. And those on the left side of the raft, dig your paddles in!* This maneuver could pull the raft out of a churning vortex.

For almost an hour, the group of rafters practiced how to respond to each command of the guide. They learned that it was very important to follow the guide's commands!

The final lesson was what the rafter should do if he is thrown from the raft. The instruction were – *If thrown from the raft, face downstream and lie on your back with your feet up. Do not hold on to the raft or try to re-enter the raft! This is the way most people get injured by trying to hold on to raft or climbing back in. Wait until we reach calm water and we will then pick you up!*

The guide steady voice enabled the six rafters with little whitewater rafting experience to work together to plot the safest course down the river.

Life has its share of whitewater rafting experiences. We will often enter into whitewater rapids in our life. One moment we are living a life of smooth sailing, and in a flash, we are paddling like mad to avoid suddenly swirling whirlpools of life. We face sharp contrasts in life!

During these sharp and tense moments in life, we need a skilled guide. We need a trusted voice to help us navigate turbulent times. In Psalm 32, God promises to be that voice, it says – *I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go!*

Let us take comfort in the fact that when life has sharp contrasts, God promises that he will counsel us with his love. God's guidance flows from his love for us. We need to trust in God during times of sharp contrast.

In our two scripture passages from the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Isaiah we have a sharp contrast between the themes of the texts. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus paints a picture for the people of a terrifying end time. The world will be overrun by war and chaos. The followers of Jesus will be persecuted for their faith. There will be betrayals and death, wars and rebellion, great earthquakes and wide scale food shortages, and massive epidemics!

Wow, these are dark and terrifying words!

It might be easy to wonder if we might be living in these times! I have to confess that there are days that I do believe we are living in these times – with coronavirus – one new case ever second in USA and over 9.5 million total cases and we are averaging 1,000 death a day with over 240,000 total deaths!

Just open a newspaper, turn on the news, turn on talk radio, or see an update on social media – and you will be overwhelmed by the many headlines of death and destruction. Conflicts are happening all around us! Natural disasters seem common and the number of those in need of food or housing or health care continue to climb. How could we live in our world and not wonder if the end time is near?

And then we are reminded of Jesus' response to the crowd when they ask Jesus for a sign to know when all these things will take place. Jesus says – *Watch out that you are not deceived. Do not be alarmed!*

Are these words of instruction helpful? Is Jesus in fact nudging us to not worry so much about the end days because the end will come as nature runs its natural course? Instead, Jesus is challenging us to focus on these lives that we are called to live while on earth!

Let me repeat that - Jesus is challenging you to focus on the life that you are called to live while on earth and to not worry about the end day! Live each day in service to Christ and if the end days are near, you will be fine!

Jesus makes it clear that the road will not be easy, but he promises that he will be with us. So rather than relying on our own will or strength, Jesus will provide the words and wisdom to go against our adversaries.

The end of the world will come Someday. In the meantime, let us stay firm in our faith as we live our lives until that day!

While Jesus describes a world full of death and destruction in Luke's Gospel, Isaiah paints a picture of the new heaven and the new earth to come. In this image in Isaiah, there is joy and gladness.

Quite a sharp contrast to Luke's Gospel! This is contrary view to the vision provided by Jesus. In Isaiah we have a picture of a New Jerusalem which will last forever. We have a picture where weeping and crying will be heard no more. We have a vision of where the wolf and lamb will eat together and the lion will eat grass like the ox. We have a picture of a utopia! A sharp contrast from Jesus' vision.

May we take ahold of Isaiah vision and also hear Jesus' words to not worry about the end time but may we live each day in service of Christ. Let us pray: Dear Lord, when our life seems like a whitewater rafting trip with sharp contrasts in it, let us seek your guiding voice.

Father, thank you for your promises to be our guide and help us to seek and listen to You as You direct the course of our lives. Help us navigate the storms of life.

O God, draw us near for you are good and your love endures forever. O Lord, you cover us in your love and your grace. And yet, there are many times when we are afraid, when we hurt, when we cry, and when we are lost. Be our strength and our shield so that we might turn to you and put our trust in you.

O God, you have promised a new heaven and a new earth, a place of joy and gladness. As we look toward that day with expectant listening, hear our prayers.

Our prayers are for those who are grieving from the loss of life. Our prayers are for the young and the old, for those who are searching for work, for those with a home and homeless, and for those in the midst of violence. Grant us the assurance, O God that we will indeed be glad and rejoice forever. It is in the holy and powerful name of Jesus Christ, we pray AMEN