



Hope in Tumultuous Times!

23RD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
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Luke 21:5-19

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray, for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them."

"When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified, for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes and in various places famines and plagues, and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven."

"But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance, for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and siblings, by relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

On Friday evening, Jeff and I watched a thought-provoking film called: *FLOW*. Has anyone seen this movie? *FLOW*, is a 2024 film directed by Gints Zilbalodis. Astoundingly, this film doesn't need any dialogue. There are the sounds of animals--a dog's bark, a cat's meow, a bird's squawk. And there are sounds of the world around them. There are no humans to be found. And yet this movie speaks directly to one's soul. It has stunningly beautiful graphics and stylized animation. Its story radiates humanity in a world devoid of humans.

The story is too complex to tell in a sermon. Essentially it is about how a black cat's solitary life is upended by a devastating flood. The cat is forced to abandon its home and seeks refuge on a boat. It teams up with an unlikely assortment of animals who must rely on each other to survive the rising waters. Besides the cat, the main characters are a sleepy capybara, an excited lemur, a friendly golden retriever, and an imposing secretary bird.

Each animal has a distinct personality and behavior that is communicated through their actions and interactions, rather than words. The scenes oscillate between tranquil introspection and tumultuous moments. There is the sense that the central metaphor is the need to abandon one's ego in favor of the collective good.

The film explores themes of survival, community, and interconnectedness. The animals represent a struggle for coexistence. They are forced to overcome their differences to navigate the dangers of their changing world. This movie can also be interpreted as an allegory for human-caused climate change, with the animals dealing with the consequences of a disaster without understanding its cause.

In the end, the animals gaze into a pool of water. About this Carlos Aguilar says, *"To see one's own reflection is to get immediate proof of your existence in the here and now—of the space you occupy in the world and perhaps even clues to how the world perceives you. And through that miracle of self-awareness, you may perhaps extend empathy to those around you, also burdened with navigating the perennial complications of being alive."*

This film illustrates how life can be. We experience tumultuous many times over the course of our lives, as the animals did in this film. So where is hope found in the many tumultuous times in our lives? What brings us hope? How do we navigate our life journeys?

Our gospel lesson and this movie remind me of how we go along in life. All seems well in the world and suddenly, it can turn a dime. What was once tranquil and lovely can instantaneously become tumultuous and almost unbearable--a devastating diagnosis, a death in the family, periods of intense social and political upheaval, wars, fires, are just a few.

The people who look up at the temple in our lesson, remind me of the World Trade Center. I used to sit by the fountain at the World Trade Center Plaza at lunch time. I'd look up at those two tall imposing buildings at 1 and 2 World Trade Center and admire them. Never in my wildest imagination did I ever think they would one day come crumbling down.

Similarly, neither did the people in Jesus' day, who admired the temple with its beautiful stones, think it would be destroyed. Yet, Jesus warns them: *"Not one stone will be left upon another."*

Both the World Trade Center and the temple were two places that conveyed power, beauty, wealth, and dominance. Yet, they were destroyed. The Jews were devastated when the temple came down. We, as a nation, were devastated when the World Trade Center crumbled to the ground. And the cat in *FLOW* had no idea a great flood was coming. It was devastated when its home was destroyed.

But here's the thing. Hope can be found when we encounter devastating times in our lives. Jesus acknowledges that truly bad things will happen, and that we shouldn't be surprised when they do. Those who are faithful followers of Jesus will not be spared from the effects of tumultuous times because they simply are a part of life.

The good news is that God gives us the ability to persevere. God gives us the resolve, agency, and tools we need to survive and move past the tumultuous times. The unlikely assortment of animals in our opening story, normally would be natural enemies, but they come together. They learn to get along. They tolerate their differences. They cooperate so they can survive. They even save each other's lives at times along the journey. And they endure the hard times.

In the process, they are transformed. Jesus tells his disciples they are going to go through hard times; he will give them wisdom and an opportunity. He then says, *"By your endurance you will gain your souls."* The burdens in journey of the animals transforms them. They learn that they are better together than being alone.

Each character is animated to reflect their unique traits. The cat's assets are sharp curiosity, generosity, and compassion. The bird's was a commanding presence. It steered and guided the boat. It persevered despite its brokenness. The dog was friendly, playful, strong and loyal. The capybara had the gift of instruction and patience as it taught the cat how to fish.

FLOW is a film that demands patience and contemplation, but it generously rewards those who allow themselves to be carried by its current. It's a work not just to be watched but to be felt--one that reflects the best of what we are capable of as humans.

Furthermore, God gives us the ability and tools to navigate the tumultuous times and the assurance that he will be with us as we find hope in these tumultuous times.

In Jesus' name, amen.