

Pastor Sarah: Josiah was 8 years old when he became king, and he ruled for thirty- one years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Jedidah; she was Adaiah's daughter and was from Bozkath. He did what was right in the Lord's eyes, and walked in the ways of his ancestor David—not deviating from it even a bit to the right or left. In the eighteenth year of King Josiah's rule, he sent the secretary Shaphan, Azaliah's son and Meshullam's grandson, to the Lord's temple with the following orders:

Scott: "Go to the high priest Hilkiah. Have him carefully count the money that has been brought to the Lord's temple and that has been collected from the people by the doorkeepers. It should be given to the supervisors in charge of the Lord's temple, who in turn should pay it to those who are in the Lord's temple, repairing the temple— the carpenters, the builders, and the masons. It should be used to pay for lumber and quarried stone to repair the temple. But there's no need to check on them regarding the money they receive, because they are honest workers."

Pastor Sarah: The high priest Hilkiah told Shaphan the secretary:

Cory: "I have found the Instruction scroll in the Lord's temple."

Pastor Sarah: Then Hilkiah turned the scroll over to Shaphan, who read it. Shaphan the secretary then went to the king and reported this to him:

Eric: "Your officials have released the money that was found in the temple and have handed it over to those who supervise the work in the Lord's temple."

Pastor Sarah: Then Shaphan the secretary told the king,

Eric: "Hilkiah the priest has given me a scroll,"

Pastor Sarah: and he read it out loud before the king. As soon as the king heard what the Instruction scroll said, he ripped his clothes. The king ordered the priest Hilkiah, Shaphan's son Ahikam, Micaiah's son Achbor, Shaphan the secretary, and Asaiah the royal officer as follows:

Scott: "Go and ask the Lord on my behalf, and on behalf of the people, and on behalf of all Judah concerning the contents of this scroll that has been found. The Lord must be furious with us because our ancestors failed to obey the words of this scroll and do everything written in it about us."

Pastor Sarah: So Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam, Achbor, Shaphan, and Asaiah went to the prophetess Huldah. She was married to Shallum, Tikvah's son and Harhas' grandson, who was in charge of the wardrobe. She lived in Jerusalem in the second district. When they spoke to her, she replied,

Rebecca: "This is what the Lord, Israel's God, says: Tell this to the man who sent you to me: This is what the Lord says: I am about to bring disaster on this place and its citizens—all the words in the scroll that Judah's king has read! My anger burns against this place, never to be quenched, because they've deserted me and have burned incense to other gods, angering me by everything they have done. But also say this to the king of Judah, who sent you to question the Lord: This is what the Lord, Israel's God, says about the message you've just heard: Because your heart was broken and you submitted before the Lord when you heard what I said about this place and its citizens—that they will become a horror and a curse—and because you ripped your clothes and cried before me, I have listened to you, declares the Lord. That's why I will gather you to your ancestors, and you will go to your grave in peace. You won't experience the disaster I am about to bring on this place."

Pastor Sarah: When they reported Huldah's words to the king, the king sent a message, and all of Judah's and Jerusalem's elders gathered before him. Then the king went up to the Lord's temple, together with all the people of Judah and all the citizens of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets, and all the people, young and old alike. There the king read out loud all the words of the covenant scroll that had been found in the Lord's temple. The king stood beside the pillar and made a covenant with the Lord that he would follow the Lord by keeping his commandments, his laws, and his regulations with all his heart and all his being in order to fulfill the words of this covenant that were written in this scroll. All of the people accepted the covenant. **-Common English Bible**

"In a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war, a young man met a young woman in a classroom and did not speak to her. For many days. His name was Saeed and her name was Nadia and he had a beard, not a full beard, more a studiously maintained stubble, and she was always clad from the tips of her toes to the bottom of her jugular notch in a flowing black robe. Back then people continued to enjoy the luxury of wearing more or less what they wanted to wear, clothing and hair wise, within certain bounds of course, and so these choices meant something.

"It might seem odd that in cities teetering at the edge of the abyss young people still go to class – in this case an evening class on corporate identity and product branding – but that is the way of things, with cities as with life, for one moment we are pottering about our errands as usual and the next we are dying, and our eternally impending ending does not put a stop to our transient beginnings and middles until the instant when it does."

So begins the novel *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid, the 2018 Multnomah County Everybody Reads selection. I caught a bit of a rebroadcast of an OPB conversation with the author of this book, and was struck by his discussion of why he chose not to identify the home city of his main characters— Saeed and Nadia. He said that while the city bears a striking resemblance to his home city of Lahor, Pakistan, he portrays a horrific, basically apocalyptic devolution of that city and he could not do that to a city he loved— he said it would be like writing a novel about your mother and giving her cancer. But more significantly, he said, he feels like almost everyone living in cities everywhere around our globe feels themselves to be on the edge of apocalypse. He wanted everyone to have a point of entry, so he left it open. He said he sends his children to schools surrounded by barbed wire and that sounds particularly terrifying perhaps, but notes that American parents send their children to schools in a nation where gun violence is out of control, and far more children are dying in American schools than Pakistani schools. If it isn't violence, it is climate change, or poverty, or war, or genocide, or polarization, or the rise of hate crimes... I think Hamid might be right. There's a pre-apocalyptic feel in cities all over the place, even right here in my dream city of Portland, Oregon, city that I love.

It is the sentence that begins "It might seem odd that in cities teetering at the edge of the abyss young people still go to class..." that grabbed me and made me think of our scripture reading this morning. Our story this morning is set in a pre-apocalyptic time in the city of Jerusalem. The Northern Kingdom has been destroyed, the residents exiled. Judah, the southern kingdom with its capital in Jerusalem, made a deal with Assyria so they're hanging on... but another power is rising, the power of Babylon... and it won't be long before the worst comes to the city they love, the nation they love.

But we are peeking in today at a briefly hopeful moment. There's a new king, and this king is evaluated more highly than any since David by the historian who composed the book of 2nd Kings. A few other kings were said to have walked in the ways of David, but about no one else is it said that he didn't deviate to the left or to the right. Only King Josiah gets this strong affirmation. He is said to be faithful to God's covenant with Israel with his whole heart and being, echoing that greatest commandment to love God with one's whole heart and being...

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We see Josiah's faithfulness in the instructions he gives for the use of the temple treasure. If you read earlier in 2 Kings you'll read of kings dipping in the temple treasury to pay tribute to threatening foreign rulers, you'll even read of one king stripping the temple of all its gold adornments to pay tribute. So it is striking that the first act we hear from young king Josiah, when he is 26 years old, he orders the use of the temple treasure, all the gifts faithful people have offered when they have come to to the temple for worship, these gifts are to be used to pay workers to repair and restore the temple, to maintain a house of worship and justly compensate the workers on behalf of the temple. This seems like a far more faithful use of the temple treasure— more aligned with the purpose for which it was given.

But there's more that shows his faithfulness.... Apparently, as sometimes happens in large houses of worship, things get stashed away. Many can testify to this practice here... so many closets and drawers... so much stashing. Somehow something very important had gotten stashed in the temple... the scroll of instruction. Probably a copy of Deuteronomy and all the guidance therein for God's people. It is a sign of how far the people had strayed that this could have been lost... this scroll that contains the 10 commandments and strong warnings about what will happen if God's covenant is not honored... when it is found and read to the king he is horrified. He can see the idolatry all around him. He knows how far his people have strayed from the most basic of God's teachings. He knows that they are doomed. He tears his clothes to show his grief, and perhaps even anger. He believes God must be rightly angry with God people. He fears the destruction that the instruction scroll attaches to unfaithfulness.

He sends his messengers to a prophetess to find out where Judah stands in relation to God, and it is confirmed, God is very angry and planning to destroy Judah, just as Israel has already been destroyed. It's going to be bad. Very bad. But God has seen the faithfulness of Josiah, so the destruction will come after he is dead. If ever there was a pre-apocalyptic moment for a city, this is it. It's going to be very, very bad. That can't be avoided. But for awhile it will be o.k.

One could respond to the news that the end is near with hands thrown up in surrender and with a pursuit of pleasure while pleasure is possible. But Josiah undertakes a great reform, he

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reads the scroll to the people, something kings were supposed to do but that no king has ever done, and he renews the covenant with God. He carries out his temple improvements and seeks to lead the people back to faithfulness to God their creator, their deliverer, their sustainer. He's restoring a temple that will soon be destroyed. This might seem to be the essence of futility. Rather like attending a marketing class, or any class, when one's city is teetering on the edge of an abyss.

But I don't see Josiah's action as crazy. I see it as inspiring. The heart of God's law for God's people is love— love of God and neighbor and self. If indeed the end is near, if things seem to be crumbling all around us, what better to give our hearts to than the practice of love of God, neighbor, and self? How better to spend our days than to focus on growing love? What could be a better way to bring meaning to these days than to come back to the basics and go all in? Isn't this what our world needs more than anything else?

Perhaps you've heard the, probably apocryphal, attribution to Martin Luther— "If I knew the world would end tomorrow, I would plant a tree." Or the similar, older, Jewish saying, "If you have a sapling in your hand and they tell you that the Messiah has arrived, first plant the sapling and then go out to greet him." One thinker suggests that this is an invitation to practice reasonable apocalypticism-- He writes, "If you knew the world would end tomorrow, you should start an institution. Plant a church. Build a hospital. Start a university. Create something that will help millions. Spin off an act of creativity that would do proud the God who flung stars into space. Reasonable apocalypticism means God will gather up all things and make them not only good, as they have been since creation, but perfect."

Today we ordain two men and one woman- two as deacons and one as an elder- and we install many others to service as deacons and elders. This commitment to service, to leading the church and caring for the vulnerable, it is itself an act of reasonable apocalypticism. These officers are dedicating themselves to helping us honor our mission of connecting with Christ and each other to serve our neighbors, and live towards our robust vision which speaks of welcome, nurture, connection across division, the passionate pursuit of social justice, care

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for the planet, cultivating renewing rest and balance, and more... This is big work, audacious work even. It seems to me that all the work of this church are acts of reasonable apocalypticism. We are giving ourselves to the growth of love in the world... to demonstrating our trust in a God who made the world good and who is working to make it perfect.

Though so much tempts despair, let's dare to invest ourselves in hope.

Rather than nurse our fears, let's dare to live our thanks.

When it is so much easier to be faithless, let's dare to be faithful.

We're in this together, and God is in this with us.

We are with the hope-inspiring, fear- dispelling, ever-faithful God.

So, my friends, let's do this.

Resources in addition to scripture that influenced or were cited in this sermon:
Jason Byassee. "Eschatological Innovation" on Faith and Leadership, [https:// faithandleadership.com/ eschatological-innovation](https://faithandleadership.com/eschatological-innovation)
Mohsin Hamid. *Exit West*. Great Britain: Penguin Random House, 2017.