"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 Jesus said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues....But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you...You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends. 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."

We do not know exactly what sort of wars and conflicts Jesus was talking about in our reading from the Gospel of Luke. We can see Jesus is preparing his disciples for the terrible conflicts they would face as Jews in Judea in the decades after these words were spoken. I thought of these verses from the Gospel of Luke as I listened to Maria Yovanovitch testify before the House Intelligence Committee on Friday.

On Friday I was driving a U-haul Truck from New Hampshire back to Syracuse. It’s a long trip, six hours of driving on state highways over the Green Mountains and around the southern edge of the Adirondacks, so I had plenty of time to listen to the radio. For most of the trip I heard the testimony of Maria Yovanovitch in front of the House Intelligence Committee.

Ambassador Yovanovitch has served us, citizens of the United States, as a member of the foreign service for 33 years and is the highest ranked female ambassador at the State Department. Ambassador Yovanovitch has taken on many challenging assignments, in war zones and in the new republics which emerged from the break-up of the Soviet Union. During her opening statement the ambassador described her service during the civil war in Somalia. Ambassador Yovanovitch described running through gunfire between opposing forces in Russia in order to go to work at the American Embassy.

I thought of the ambassador’s experience as I read these lines from our Gospel passage: *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 Jesus said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom."

In Ukraine Ambassador Yovanovitch’s was completely concerned with two threats to the young nation. The first threat came from the outside, from Russia. Russian forces invaded Ukraine in 2014 and continue to fight against the Ukrainian army. Over 13,000 Ukrainians have died in the ongoing war with Russia. The second threat is the threat of corruption. Ambassador Yovanovitch supported those who are working to make Ukraine into a stable democracy, governed by the rule of law.

Ambassador Yovanovitch described her work to support the Ukrainian people in rooting out corruption. In Ukraine, as in all places, corruption almost always follows a familiar pattern. Whether it is in Ukraine or the United States or El Salvador, corruption happens when people with power use their power to gain more power and to avoid the rule of law.

So Ambassador Yovanovitch was shocked when she first heard that there was a campaign to discredit her work. In her statement to congress she said, “Ukrainians who preferred to play by the old, corrupt rules sought to remove me. What continues to amaze me is that they found Americans willing to partner with them, and working together, they apparently succeeded in orchestrating the removal of a US Ambassador.”

Based on the lies of a group of Americans and Ukrainians Ambassador Yovanovitch was removed from her position as ambassador to Ukraine in May. Before she answered the questions of the House Committee, Ambassador Yovanovitch asked the most important questions of the day. “How could our system fail like this? How is it that foreign corrupt interests could manipulate our government?”

I thought of Ambassador Yovanovitch’s words and her experience as I read our Gospel passage again: *You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends.* As she testified, members of congress and other elected leaders either blamed Ambassador Yovanovitch for the poor treatment she received or attempted to minimize the results of the smear campaign against her. The
Secretary of State refused to make a statement of support for her. I thought of Ambassador Yovanovitch’s testimony as I read the last verse of our Gospel passage: *You will be hated by all because of my name.*

In Ambassador Yovanovitch’s case she wasn’t hated because of her faith. She was hated, she was slandered by others as ‘bad news’, because of her loyalty to the constitution of the United States.

There is a struggle for justice. There is right and there is wrong. There are people working to serve the interests of our nation and there are people working to serve their own interests. There are people, like Ambassador Yovanovitch, who are fighting corruption and they are opposed by those who using corrupt means to increase their power. There is one group of people working to learn and tell the truth and there is another group of people who are not telling the truth. It was the same way in Jesus’ time. *Do not be terrified.*

*By your endurance you will gain your souls.* The last several weeks and months and years have sometimes felt like an endurance race to me. Perhaps it has felt this way for you too. We are like Jesus and his disciples. Jesus was fully engaged in the struggles of his time and place, such as the centuries-old conflict between the Samaritans and the Jews. God’s call to us is to be engaged in the struggles of our times, to listen to the evidence and try to make correct decisions about right and wrong. God calls us to be partners in doing the work of justice. The work of justice often feels like a struggle.

God is also calling us to a different sort of work. God calls us to participate in the work of God’s new creation. Isaiah tells of God’s new creation: *I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating.*

We cannot know everything about God’s new creation. That’s because it is God’s new creation, not ours. God’s new creation is not something we are planning. God’s new creation is what we are trying to see around us.

God’s new creation will be different from what we have experienced before. God’s new creation will be unexpected. Isaiah says, *The wolf and the lamb shall feed together.* My friends in Wyoming told me this is something we should never expect to happen, because in Wyoming the wolves attack and eat plenty of sheep every year, though I would add the caveat that far more sheep are killed by coyotes and by dogs than by wolves.

But Isaiah’s point stands out like a wolf eating next to a lamb; God’s new creation is completely unexpected. Isaiah says, *No more shall there be an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime.* God’s new creation brings deep joy. God’s new creation does not mean the struggle for justice is over, but God’s new creation means there are places of unexpected joy.

Amid the struggle of life God is calling us to participate in a new creation, in works and places of joy given by God as we engage with people and creation.

Here is a simple example. About six months ago Liz came to me with a photo, sent from one of her cousins. It was a photo of a set of doors painted in rainbow colors outside her cousin’s church in Texas. Liz was full of joy telling me about the doors and the message of the doors, so we collected seven old doors. One Saturday in August, David, Sophie and Mark painted them seven different colors. We built a stand to hold them upright in front of the church. Liz painted on the message: “God’s doors are open to all.” For the next ten weeks we found groups of people taking photos in front of the doors and the message. We can only guess that for many people St. Paul’s is now identified as the church with the rainbow doors. We feel the attraction of people to this unexpected place so strongly that we felt it necessary to post a sign promising that the doors will return when winter is over.

You have more examples of God’s new creation in your life. Some of us see the work of God’s new creation in the Caring Place. Some of us see God’s new creation in our families or among our friends. A few of us see the work of God’s new creation at our workplaces or in our neighborhoods.

The struggle is not over. God is calling us to learn what is right and to do justice. God is also calling us to participate in an unexpected time and place of joy, to be part of God’s new creation.