

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 21:5-19
November 17th, 2019
The Rev. John Forman

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus 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 brothers, 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."

It's mid-November. There are two weeks left in this liturgical year; two more weeks of Luke's Gospel before we move on to the year of Matthew. Here in the Pacific Northwest, the days are getting shorter, cooler and wetter. In the corners of our yard, Japanese maple leaves that were fluorescent red and hazelnut leaves that were lemon-yellow when they fell now lie in wet piles along with sugar maple, mountain ash and cherry leaves all turning the same tobacco brown.

Across the country, the wheat harvest is in for the year; a rough year for many farmers and getting worse. For vineyards, the 2019 vintage has entered the last few weeks of a decent harvest, and the forecast is for an uneventful ride to the end. Flour millers are gathering raw wheat, which they will purify, wash and grind into flour. At wineries, vignerons have chosen the grapes they are preparing to crush so that yeast can get to work.

Whether the harvest has been plentiful or lean, home gardeners, millers and vintners still follow the seasonal patterns of ancient farmers. And in the growing November darkness at the end of the harvest, many of them also still recognize and embrace the astonishing dichotomy of decline and death that is pregnant with the promise of new life to come.

Decaying leaves become the source of nutrition for new growth. Wheat ground into flour becomes life-giving bread. Crushed grapes become luscious wine. Just so, from the destruction of yet another magnificent temple comes new life; in the midst of diminishment, comes an experience of a different home for God's presence, a dwelling place that can never be destroyed.

The extraordinary vision we heard from Isaiah comes from a section of the book that scholars call Third Isaiah. It was most likely written by Jews that the Persian King Cyrus liberated from their Babylonian exile. They returned to find Jerusalem in shambles, her farms and homes destroyed. The prophet reassures them that God has not abandoned Israel. Instead, God promises through the prophet: "They shall build houses and inhabit them, they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit."

The simple, mundane activities of building and planting are the ways that the people participate in God's recreation of life and prosperity for God's children.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus is talking with his followers on the Mount of Olives within sight of the second Temple that Herod built. Properly impressed, people are talking about the stunning building that held the center of national and religious life and imagination. Now, there is an unintended consequence of a temple made of such massive and beautiful stones on such an enormous scale. It can become difficult to distinguish the Divine Presence from the earthly structure *dedicated* to that Divine Presence.

Luke, of course, was writing after the Roman general Titus and his troops had desecrated and destroyed the Temple. Luke is describing events that have already happened. Jesus never denies the beauty of the Temple; he simply points out that what his followers can see is physical, temporary beauty and, as such, is not immune from decay. Days will come, Jesus warns, when natural erosion and human looting will bring the Temple to ruin.

In their anxiety, his followers interrogate him. "When, teacher, will these things be? What sign will tell us that these things are coming?" Jesus gives them no sign and warns them instead not to be led astray by others using his name. And then, still not giving them a picture of the end of time, Luke's Jesus speaks to what is already happening in Luke's world.

The Roman army entered the city around the same time that Luke was writing. They killed thousands and led thousands away as captives, burned houses and left the Temple in ruins. And in the face of that catastrophe,

Luke's Jesus promises that despite the destruction, in their patience, his followers will possess their souls.

This story is not about end times, at least not in the way that we might expect. This story is about "right now" times. Here in the Pacific Northwest, we are not persecuted like Christians in North Korea, Pakistan or India; not like Christians in Columbia, Nigeria or parts of Sudan.

For us, the more immediate threat is from teachers who distort the Gospel. There are teachers who insist that Christians should align themselves with the powers of empire; some who teach that personal safety and financial prosperity are the evidence of true Christian faith. There are teachers who warp God's promise of universal salvation for all creation with misinformed horror stories like the Left Behind series and still others who get wealthy preaching fear, ignorance and intolerance.

Luke's Jesus presents a dramatically different understanding of faith. We are a community of witnesses to the love of God in a massively conflicted world, not as individuals but as the Body of Christ, the church brought to life by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Luke is clearly responding to the crises of early Christian communities by giving them words of comfort and courage in their hour of doubt and despair. What Jesus gave to all Christian communities was not a timetable. He gives us an invitation. One that we can respond to in faith. He does not invite us to prepare selfishly for the end-time. Instead, the offer is to seize the present, the moment we are in today, to serve others with faith and confidence in Christ.

That means there is still an appropriate role for holy places. There is still a pressing need for places where we can ask unguarded questions; where we can expose our faults to the light and to learn *together* how to endure, how to *persevere* together, bearing each other up not because we are more worthy or better than anyone else, but precisely because we are neither.

This is the grinding season, the crush season, though the harvest is long from complete. As we abide attentively together, God transforms us like wheat into bread. As we persist with patience together, God transfigures us like grapes into wine. At each and every Mass, this room *is* the temple of heaven and this marble table is God's throne.

And at this table, God takes our gifts of bread and wine, and ourselves – our souls, our minds, our bodies. Then God blesses the gifts we offer as the

body of Christ to be broken and given. And so, while it is true, in a sense, that very little depends on this building, it's also true that a great deal depends on this place, this sanctuary; on all sanctuaries, come to that.

Here in this holy space, we rehearse and develop a sense of deepening into holiness. We move from the world outside these walls into a hallway, the narthex, where we meet friends or at least friendly strangers. We pass through doors past a small container of holy water, as if crossing the river Jordan into the Holy Land. Many of us dip our fingers into the water and cross ourselves to remind us of our baptism.

And then we walk deeper into the nave where we listen to readings that connect us to our ancestors and through which God speaks to us of our common future. We join our voices in prayer and in song.

When the time comes, we move from our pews to cross the plane where the baptismal font and the pulpit flank the steps to the altar. And there we stand at the open and undefended threshold of God's Holy table, the Holy of Holies. We take the life of Christ *into* ourselves and leave this sacred space to carry the light of Christ out to a dark and distressed world.

And Christ is there.

Sanctuaries, you see, show us how to enter into mystery. With repetition and learning, the movement of the liturgy teaches our bodies, minds and souls to approach the sacred first with friendship, then reverence, then unity and finally awe. We come to understand that the true Holy of Holies is each other and all of creation through the doors and outside the walls of this holy place.

With persistence and practice, we grow increasingly aware that we enter the Holy of Holies only to be filled and sent out into the larger Holy of Holies, bearing within us God's heaven, "the sanctuary not made with human hands."

Even the most majestic temples dedicated to the Divine Presence crumble and fall in time. And yet, the Divine Presence that can seem so fleeting, so insubstantial to us now, endures throughout all time.

We see it when we give it away.

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