

November 17, 2019

Sermon for Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost - Luke 21:5-19
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Notre Dame in Paris - 2019. Christchurch Cathedral in New Zealand - 2011. The Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan - 2001. The Twin Towers in New York City - 2001. The Library of Alexandria in Egypt - first century AD. The Second Temple in Jerusalem - 70 AD... less than 40 years after Jesus spoke the words we heard in today's Gospel reading.

Both the first and second Temples in Jerusalem were a bit of heaven on earth. The Temple was a very special place where God's presence could come to be with his chosen people. The Temple was a space God could fill, a space holy enough for God, and a space where God and his people could be in each others' presence. Sacred spaces are like this in many religious traditions, and Christian worship space like the one we're in today is no different.

Just look at this beautiful building, these gorgeous stained glass windows, and all the gifts we've adorned this space with. It is truly a place filled with the Holy Spirit, a holy place, and a place we gather within to be in the presence of God.

What else is like the Temple? What else is like this church? What other place is there that God dwells within so intimately? What physical presence is there that is holy and where we can be in the presence of God?

The answer is in the upcoming season of Advent. The answer is the incarnation. The answer is Jesus.

Jesus mentions the connection between his body on earth and the Temple elsewhere in the Gospels, but in Luke the metaphor is more subtle. In this chapter of Luke the disciples are given their final warnings about the death and resurrection of Jesus before the Last Supper and the capture of Jesus. In this chapter of Luke the disciples are given some of the last warnings about how to watch and live until Jesus returns to reconcile all things to himself.

In this reading, Jesus says that the Temple will be gone, but he doesn't suggest that the disciples will stop praying or being in the presence of God. Jesus indicates that he will not be physically with the disciples when he says, "Many will come in my name," and say, "I am he." Jesus tells the disciples to not be led astray by those who would try to fool them when Jesus ascends to the Father.

For a long time I was confused by this passage about the destruction of the Temple and about the disciples being fooled by false messiahs. I was confused until I began to notice that Jesus has a way of pointing out that the thing is never really the thing. He's constantly pointing beyond mere appearances and directing us to the deeper reality of the Kingdom of God. The Temple, for example, is not just stones and lovely things. His own body and being, for example, is not merely mortal flesh and bone as we will see at the resurrection.

When we seek God in temple or church or in Christ we are not limited to stone or brick or mortal body. There is something beyond that which can be destroyed. There is something beyond what we see and feel. This is a teaching that should bring comfort. When Jesus dies, the disciples will need to hold fast until the resurrection. When Jesus ascends to be with the Father, the disciples will need to hold fast to the Holy Spirit until Jesus returns.

These words are supposed to be comforting and consoling and encouraging. Do not be afraid, he tells us here and elsewhere. Terrible things will happen, but don't be afraid.

You'll be arrested and persecuted, and rejected and brutalized by your family too. But don't be afraid.

This is an opportunity to witness to your persecutors the good news of the risen Christ, the good news of the Kingdom of God. So don't be afraid.

Jesus will tell us what to say to these opponents. Don't be afraid.

You will be hated by everyone because of Jesus and yet you will not perish. Don't be afraid. If you withstand all of this you will gain your eternal souls.

I don't know about you, but hearing about all these terrible things that will happen to me and my fellow believers still makes me afraid no matter how many times Jesus tells us not to be afraid.

And yet it's the Gospel truth. Literally. Fearlessness through faith is entirely part of the good news given to us by the Great Consoler.

But why is this story of suffering and testing a comforting story? Because there is more to the story than material things. Because there is more to God than the Temple. Because there is more to Jesus than just his body. Because there is more to our eternal lives than just our mortal bodies.

That's not to say that incarnation is not important. It is. But there is more. There's more beyond what we see. There's more beyond mere wars and plagues and scary things happening in the sky. There's more to our story with Jesus than the inevitable waxing and waning of economies and political powers. There's more to our story of God in Christ than the waxing and waning of the worldwide Anglican Communion over the last 500 years.

Look around. Look at this church. There will come a day when not one brick will be left upon another and only dust will remain. That day may be a long way off, but it will come. That news doesn't sound consoling. But it is. It's consoling because there's something beyond these bricks and glass. Grace is way more than bricks and glass. This part of the Body of Christ we call Grace will outlive these bricks and this glass.

We will all have to dodge the trials and tribulations life usually brings. Our trials may not come in the form of wars and plagues. Instead they may come in the form of climate change and economic collapse.

Our loved ones may want to take a few kicks at us too. Our families may try to reason with us and tell us there's no point in the Church anymore. No point in devoting ourselves to something that appears, in the world's eyes, to be failing. And like the early Church, we may find ourselves in conflict with civil authorities who may persecute us by, for example, auditing our tax returns more than other people.

None of these trials really harm us if we take the opportunity to proclaim what we know is beyond the transitory and hold fast to what we know is eternal. Hold fast to the Gospel. Hold fast to Christ and to each other in the spirit of truth and holiness.

All that surrounds us will eventually fall down around our ears. It is the nature of life and the older we get the more we see this happening in our personal lives. But there is good news and it is consoling.

The good news is this: Jesus rose from the dead and death can never touch him. Jesus gave us his eternal life and that life lives in us now and forever.

My friends, not a hair on our heads will perish. Our endurance will gain our souls. In the face of ever more rapidly changing life and increasing decline of all we hold dear, be consoled and comforted that there is eternal love and eternal life beyond these temporary difficulties.

Do not be afraid. Also, do not be fooled by spiritual fake news. But be comforted. By our faith and our endurance we have already gained our eternal souls.

Amen.