

November 17, 2019
Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost
Celebration Sunday
Dedication of Participation Cards

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All Will Be Thrown Down

Luke 21:5-19

Jesus moved through his ministry toward Jerusalem with a single-minded intention, to confront finally what the prophets of Israel had said about him, and what his followers never understood: “the son of man will be handed over to the gentiles, mocked, insulted, flogged and killed and on the third day rise again from the dead.”

In today's text he has arrived in Jerusalem, and what he has told his disciples begins to unfold.

Jerusalem, or Zion, is the city of the Lord. And the temple is the dwelling place of God. It is a fortress, and was the center of Israel's culture and faith. Nothing would shake or destroy God's holy city, the psalms tell us. A huge confidence grew through centuries that this would be so. It was not challenged, and was central to the leadership and life of Israel. Jerusalem is the eternal city of the Lord.

So what Jesus says in the text for today about the temple, that the days are coming when “not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down,” this is a prophetic word that pushes against centuries of faith and certainty. There is a reckoning and judgement of Israel that is coming, and Jesus is right at the center of it.

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But then Jesus' language changes. It becomes language of how to manage in catastrophic times, leaders appear who are fraudulent, there are wars and rumors of wars, with earthquakes, famines, plagues, dreadful portents, and great signs in the heavens, persecutions and nasty betrayal by family members, public rebuke. Jerusalem surrounded by armies, days of vengeance Jesus says, fulfilling all that is written. The power of heavens are shaken, and you will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with great glory. Then Jesus says, when all this happens, “stand up and raise your heads for your redemption is near.”

This is a tough text for a morning devotional. I hope my day is that bad, we might say.

These same words, almost exactly appear in all three of the gospels just before the passion story of Jesus begins. They are called by bible writers, ‘the little apocalypse.’

We have jumped a long way in the text from the simple, understandable stories and teaching of Jesus, to a warning that a conflagration in all the heavens and earth is about to take place.

Why do the gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all place 'the little apocalypse' right here—there must be reason. Perhaps it foresees the death and resurrection of Christ, perhaps it foresees the actual destruction of the Jerusalem temple in a brief 40 years, and a siege of Jerusalem, or perhaps it is foreseeing the second coming of Christ.

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I grew up in a church and family context where the second coming of Christ was always on the table. In seminary it had cooled off, but many students continued to discuss the complex signs, wonders, and events that warned of the coming of Christ.

I don't know the answer to this question. Second coming of Christ, the destruction of the Jewish temple, the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, it is difficult to discern, but one thing is for sure, there is a great conflagration that will happen where nothing is any longer the same, where even the Israel's beautiful temple, over 500 years old, is destroyed.

The apocalyptic language of the Bible, not only here but in Old Testament texts like Daniel, Zechariah, and Revelation, the consummate apocalyptic text of the NT, this language seems to appear when all human efforts at faithfulness to the Lord have failed, and God seems to take over himself, with portents and signs in the heaven, and finally, a descent of God himself, Son of Man, or the second coming of Christ.

So what do we do with this. First nothing is certain, everything is transient, nothing ever stays the same. And that even the most reliable of references to the stability of life can be lost.

Spiritual life and health and our life in Christ begins with letting go of what we always felt was so, that would never change, when we begin to see where we were wrong about ourselves, others, the church, and then to walk away from the old, with faith, and into the new, waiting for the more truthful part of ourselves, our community, our church to emerge.

Israel needed to let go of the temple of Jerusalem and look for the new thing God was doing. Near the end of the church year, as our rehearsal of the gospel soon ends (next Sunday with Christ the King), we are called by Jesus to learn wisdom, to not hold on to what passes, but wait with faith for the new thing God is doing.

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Second, when a rattling and shaking of all things begins to happen, there is consolation from the Lord, that we will manage, and that it is the beginning of something new that God is seeking to do.

Jesus says, don't worry about what you will say when everything seems lost and very difficult, the Holy Spirit will give you the words to say.

We very much need this consolation when everything is changing. One of the ironies of scripture is the Book of Lamentations, following Jeremiah in the OT, where for several pages the lament goes on and on, and suddenly out of nowhere there is this word of great confidence, "the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies are new every day."

We can be certain we will, the church will, the nation will be fine, for it is like a woman in labor, Paul the apostle says, moving through labor pains until the new is born.

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Third, through this time of uncertainty the discipline of spiritual life that we learn is vigilance, watchfulness, to be prepared, ready, like the Minutemen in their resistance against the British. Spiritual life in these times requires great vigilance so that we are not left behind, lost, or so stunned so we cannot manage.

Matthew 25, for those studying Matthew with Rev. Frohman is the chapter to study to learn vigilance and watchfulness in times of great change.

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In 2008, Jan and I visited Berlin. I had been in 2001 and tasted a sour cherry sauce on vanilla ice cream that blew my mind and I wanted to take my wife there to taste it.

We saw many things. There was great change happening in Berlin, with building cranes everywhere. There was something about the building cranes that Berlin people associated with President Jimmy Carter's smile. I don't remember, it will come to me.

The most moving visit was the Lutheran Cathedral. The Cathedral had been severely damaged by bombs during the Second World War and wasn't used for nearly 40 years (?).

It was in front of the temple that many of the Nazi rallies were held, with their growing enthusiasm for a 1000 year Reich. On the front of the Cathedral, was a sculpture of Christ with the Lord's words printed, "my words will live forever."

The irony was obvious as we walked into the beautifully restored cathedral, where at least for now the word of Lord stands.

We worshiped there on a Sunday morning. I remember a prelude by Mendelssohn, and after the service a Dutch couple that greeted us, and asked, 'are you believers,' Yes, we said. So are we, they said.

Through great change, the Lord brought about something new.

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You are going through transition, be vigilant, study Matthew 25. Trust that the Lord will give you everything you need to manage, even the words to say, and be wise, for nothing stays the same, except the steadfast love of the Lord, the words of Jesus, the gospel we share.