Deuteronomy 26:1-11
When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, 2 you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. 3 You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, “Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us.” 4 When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, 5 you shall make this response before the LORD your God: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. 6 When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, 7 we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. 8 The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; 9 and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. 10 So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.” You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. 11 Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.


He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; 2 he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. 3 He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; 4 for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.”

5 When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, 6 “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.”

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1 Credit to Rev. Michael Lindvall whose sermon by the same title was preached to Brick Presbyterian Church, New York City, on November 18, 2008. This sermon is adapted from his.
Sermon

The four Latin words that title this sermon are usually translated, “Thus passes the glory of the world.” How many of you took Latin in high school or college? I did... and it seemed a good idea, but I was a junior in high school and didn’t pay too much attention at the time. But if you were a better student than I was... and if you like to say Latin things... today’s sermon title is a handy aphorism... I even heard it used on the radio this week. It's something one might say when a gazillionaire suddenly loses his fortune: “Sic transit gloria mundi.” Or you might say it when a once-beautiful diva dies alone in her Beverly Hill mansion: “Sic transit gloria mundi.” It’s what you might say when palatial residence is suddenly reduced to rubble by an earthquake: “Sic transit gloria mundi.” “Thus passes the glory of the world.”

And if people had said it back in Bible days, they might have said it when the Great Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by Romans in 70 A.D. They couldn’t do that, of course, because the phrase originated much later. In fact, it first came to use as part of a quirky little ceremony during the coronation of Roman Catholic popes. Amid all the pomp and circumstance of that event, at one point a barefoot monk approaches the newly crowned pontiff, looks him in the eye and says, “Pater sancti, sic transit gloria mundi,” “Holy father, thus passes the glory of the world.”

Since then the phrase has developed a life of its own... even appearing in Mel Brooks’ “The History of the World, Part I.” In the film, Brooks has a Roman Senator speak a shortened version of the phrase “Sic transit gloria,” one Roman Senator says to another in Latin. To which the second replies, in English, “I didn’t even know Gloria was sick.” Leave it to Mel Brooks, eh?

This morning’s Gospel reading finds Jesus and his disciples in Jerusalem during what we call Holy Week. Each day, Jesus goes to the courtyard of the magnificent Temple which is built atop the highest hill in Jerusalem. The infamous King Herod had begun this particular temple almost 50 years earlier; and though it was still probably not completed, it was nevertheless very impressive. As we read the first six verses of Luke 21, we see two things happen. First, Jesus and his followers watch people making contributions to the temple. They do this by dropping coins in one of 13 containers which are shaped like sort of like inverted trumpets and installed for that purpose. As you heard, several wealthy people make generous donations. We can be sure that those offerings made LOTS of noise as all those coins went in. Then, a poor widow arrives and makes a very modest, but for her, very generous, donation. Finally, in the second part of the reading, the disciples turn their attention from these contributors to the temple itself. They comment about how spectacular the building is, “adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God.” To which Jesus replies, “… the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” “Sic transit gloria mundi,” as it were.

It was about forty years later... well after Jesus’ death and resurrection... that the Roman general Titus laid siege to Jerusalem. And in August of 70 A. D., the city fell to the Roman legions. The great temple was utterly destroyed... leaving only one massive
retaining wall on the western foot of the temple mount. Our group saw it when we were there in September – that wall, the Western or “Wailing Wall” – it is all there is today.

Now, there are two theories as to why the temple was leveled. One says that it was a deliberate strategy. Titus wanted to humiliate the Jews and stamp out the Jewish and Christian religions that were associated with the temple. Remember that in the First Century, Christians were still seen as a particular kind of Jew. The other theory says that Titus’ troops just got out of hand and burning the temple was a mistake. Either way, one thing is obvious: all these centuries later the temple is still in ruins… but Judaism and Christianity are very much alive. So you have to ask this question: if the temple was bound for dust… and if Judaism and Christianity would survive the temple’s passing, what do you say to the widow who donated everything she had to that temple? What do you say to anyone, rich or poor, who dropped contributions in those trumpet-shaped offering plates? And for that matter, what do you say to all of us, who in ten minutes will enact a 21st century version of that very scene in the temple? We don’t have thirteen upside-down brass trumpets, just a pair of wicker baskets. But you have to admit that the scene does seem to echo Luke 21.

Yes, later in the service we will all be invited to come forward and place some gift: your Sunday offering, your 2017 pledge, some personal commitment, maybe a prayer scribbled on a piece of paper… to bring something to place in a container in this glorious latter-day temple. And we will do so knowing that the Jerusalem temple was not forever… and that this gorgeous building we’re sitting in isn’t forever, either. No building is forever… no congregation itself is forever. None of the mission organizations we support with the money we give to the church are forever. Great churches come and go. Successful mission efforts come and go. Cities, nations, empires come and go. You and I come and go. Eventually everything comes and goes. “Sic transit gloria mundi” Thus passes the glory of the world.

But here’s the deep truth on which our faith is based: not every glory passes. The glory of God does not pass. The glories of God that are love and compassion and mercy and righteousness do not pass away. The glories of God that are holiness and justice and wisdom and majesty do not pass away. And everything we offer to the glory of God - because it becomes part of the glory of God - does not “transit,” it does not pass away.

So when you walk forward in a moment and place whatever you offer in the basket, offer it to the glory of God. Not for the glory of the church… our projects… our programs… our tradition… our reputation… our pastors… or this great old building. Offer it all to the glory of God… and you do that… you give all to the glory of God… when you remember that that the ONLY REASON you can give anything at all is that God has given you the life… the means… the health, the energy, the motivation to do it in the first place.

People, especially successful people, are often tempted to imagine otherwise… that they’re totally self-made… that they earned it and deserve what they have… that they did it all by themselves. But the truth is this: behind every success and underneath every
accomplishment are gifts... gifts from God. Gifts like good health gifts like a clever mind, gifts like insight or talent or intuition, gifts like a good education and supportive family, even gifts like being born into privilege. These are gifts. We did nothing to deserve them. we did not earn them... they are not ours by right. So we give God the glory by being completely honest about the fact that we simply did not get here by ourselves; we only get anywhere by the grace of God.

During this fall stewardship season we have acknowledged the fact that there is a passing of the torch underway in this congregation. This year we have lost so many of the great saints who for decades worshiped and served God in this church community. And this experience has provided for all of us a poignant reminder of the generations of giving that have preceded us here... of the gift of the shoulders on which we now stand. So let us give God the glory by remembering that all of this effort is not for us or for our good. It is for the glory of God that this church is not essentially for us; it’s for God. That everything we try to do as a church is not to our credit; the credit goes to God who is simply using us to do it. It’s all from God… and it all returns to God… and it is in this circle of gift received and gift given that God is glorified.

I like that – it is in the circle of gift received and gift given that God is glorified. And even though the glory of our noblest efforts will pass away… the glory of this church will pass away… and you and I will eventually pass into a greater glory... God’s glory does not pass away… and anything we offer to the glory of God abides forever.

I realize this all may sound a bit mystical for a Presbyterian pastor to be saying... but in a moment, when we come forward, we’ll each have the opportunity to do something that will really last... even last forever. The gifts we bring... the commitments we make... the prayers we promise to offer are taken up into the glory of God. All we give… all we do… becomes a part of God’s eternal purpose which is love.

The temple to which that poor widow in Jerusalem offered her two cents would be dust forty years later. But her gift was not made simply to that passing temple; her gift was offered to the glory of God. And here we are... two thousand years later... reaping the spiritual fruit of her gift. Her two cents live! And by God’s grace, so will our gifts offered to God’s glory... our gifts will live!

Which gives me an idea…“Sic transit Gloria mundi” is indeed true – the glory of the world does pass away. But what if we were to coin a fresh Latin aphorism this morning... sort of a counter-truth to that old truth. You can check the Latin to make sure I have it right – it goes like this: “Sic non transit gloria dei.” “The glory of God does not pass away.” “Sic non transit gloria dei.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.