

Ruined Temples

Isaiah 65:17-25, Luke 21:5-19

First Presbyterian Church

November 17, 2019

Introduction to Readings

A mother cat was out on a stroll with her three small kittens. They were all enjoying the walk when suddenly the mother cat saw a huge dog coming toward them in the distance. She quickly gathered her kittens and tucked them under a nearby porch where they would be safe from the dog. Then she turned to face the approaching danger. They walked slowly toward each other until finally they were almost nose to nose. The mother cat looked straight into the dog's eyes and went, "Ruff! Ruff! Ruff! Ruff!" With that the dog turned and ran away. The mother cat then returned to her kittens, crawled under the porch, looked them in the eyes and said, "Now... I am going to explain to you why I insist you learn a second language."¹

Many of us have studied a second language, whether it be Spanish or French or for those who are REALLY fortunate, Hebrew or Greek. Well, it's not too much of a stretch to say the Bible teaches us a second language – the language of the reign of God. It is a way of speaking which when studied and learned will in time lead to a new way of seeing and hearing, of thinking and behaving. Both of this morning's readings come from a particular part of that second language – it's called apocalyptic... it uses vivid and dramatic language – sometimes strange images – almost like a work of art... for the purpose of revealing how the ultimate will of God is being worked out in the events of this world.

Our Hebrew Bible reading from Isaiah casts a vision of a new heaven and new earth. It is a beautiful vision of a transformed environment and community woven together in peace and wholeness. Our Gospel, on the other hand, pictures what one has deemed "a terrible ungluing" (or coming apart) of this world so that a new world might come. However, both readings picture God as the One who, even in the bleakest hour of human history, has the capacity to make thing new again. All things come to an end, these passages say... but nothing is final... not with God.

Isaiah 65:17-25

¹⁷For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. ¹⁸But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. ¹⁹I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. ²⁰No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. ²¹They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ²²They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat; for like the days of a

¹ This story is from a sermon "Learning a New Language" by Daniel P. Matthews, published in *Lectionary Homiletics*.

tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.
²³They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD— and their descendants as well. ²⁴Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking, I will hear. ²⁵The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.

Luke 21:5-19

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

Sermon

I suppose you are wondering why I have my hardhat here with me in the pulpit. Well, did you not hear what Jesus said about the temple? “Not one stone will be left on another; all will be thrown down.” The truth is – I’ve worn a hard hat in the pulpit once before. It was this very week nine years ago in Ames, IA. I was planning to preach on this text on Sunday and of all the weird things, on Tuesday parts of the chancel ceiling just above the communion table began to fall. Then it happened again on Thursday – baseball-size chunks of one-hundred-year-old plaster came crashing down on our communion table. The first time we figured it was just a fluke and cleaned it up. The second time we thought, “Well, maybe we ought to call in the trustees and move the table. And, just in case there was a third time during my sermon... well, I wanted to be ready.

As Luke sets this scene, Jesus is at the end of his public ministry. He is standing with a group of people at the entrance to the temple in Jerusalem. It was, by all accounts, a totally magnificent structure, both in size and in beauty... certainly THE MOST IMPRESSIVE building these people would ever see. As one ancient observer reports... the front wall around the entrance was overlaid with gold, so that at certain times of the day the reflection of the sun was blinding.

The walls were white marble... there were porches lined with columns topped with ornate capitals... great marble tables stood ready for the sacrifice. The central shrine itself was more than 100 feet high; which in that day was a spectacular height. And what sets Jesus off is somebody's innocent remark about the beauty of the temple... some rubbernecked pilgrim ooohs and aaahs about the splendor of the stones... when Jesus whirls around, "there won't one stone left standing on another; all will be thrown down." You can imagine the shock... and disbelief – THE largest and most beautiful building you have ever seen... with foundation stones weighing over 600 tons... THE holiest ground you have ever known... God's very house... will crumble around you.²

And according to Jesus, that's before the really wild stuff starts to go down – THEN... Jerusalem will be surrounded by marauding armies... the nations will be confused by roaring seas and shaking heavens... peaceful societies will crumble into violence, and comfortable cultures will unravel into famine. Family ties will come undone, relatives will hand each other over to the authorities, and people will be thrown into prison simply for being believers... and then, the Son of Man will come in a cloud.³

Sobering stuff, right? But let's be honest... all this "second language" talk about the end time is hard for us deal with in our day. In fact, it's kind of embarrassing and none of us wants to sound like a religious crazy person. Though we know we've got issues, to us the world seems much too solid and stable to be ready for such an ending such as that. And yet, for all our intellectual sophistication... for all the security that comes from our affluence... for all our confidence in technology and hope for progress... there is, I think, a deep, unsettled feeling that things are indeed falling apart... that without being overly apocalyptic (aka, being a "religious crazy person"), a lot of folk sense that we have now come to some kind of massive ending in our time.⁴

The problem is that in every century someone has read this vivid Gospel language... they have taken a good look at their world... and their conclusion is the end is happening right now! This end that Jesus predicts is happening right now... or, at least, next week." Pundits and preachers – both liberal and conservative – passionately warn us that the end is near. Climate change is going to destroy us... immigration is going to destroy us... the church is crumbling around us... democracy itself is under siege. But here's the thing - Jesus' description of the end of the world (and what will lead up to it) has been applied to *every* century of *every* era. After all, Jesus says that, just before the end, we will see wars, famines, earthquakes, and people of faith betrayed and persecuted. Well, those things have happened in every century since Jesus rose from the dead. And they are still happening.

So, if we hear a text like this... and like the disciples ask the question "When? When the end will come? When will it all come crumbling down?" we may be missing the point. Because the truth is EVERY temple is doomed... every earthly structure for housing the holy will wear out its use.

² Paul D. Duke in "Ruined Temples," *Christian Century*, November 1, 1995, p. 1011

³ See Luke 21:20-28.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, "The Terrible Ungluing," *Christian Century*, October 21, 1992, p. 931

Name any temple you like... a church... a house... a marriage... a family... a friendship... a job... the memory of how things once were... the dream of how things might yet be – name any temple you like... they all have a lifespan... they all come to an end. So that in a sense, the End of the world visits us over and over during the course our lives – in every crisis, every death, every loss, every ending there is a rehearsal of the final End.

Well, such endings are almost never welcome... and truly they must be mourned. How can we not mourn deaths and losses of this life? But sooner or later, part of what it means to be a person of faith is to trust what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: we do not grieve as others do who have no hope. For we trust that in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth we have already seen the end... that the world has come to a decisive crisis... and that in his death and resurrection the entire history of the universe has reached a turning point. Because at that moment, when he was nailed to a cross... the conflict between life and death, good and evil, God and Caesar... the conflict was “once and for all” resolved in favor of God.⁵ Trusting this, we still mourn these deaths and losses and all the ruined temples of this world, but we begin to see them as Jesus sees them. Or to be more precise, to begin see them from where our worship will place us next week as we celebrate the Reign of Christ.

We see all our endings in light of our faith in the One who is alive and stands at the End of history holding them all. This is how people of faith find faithfulness to the End. This is how we endure... and by enduring gain our souls.

I have little doubt that over the past twelve months each of you has experienced some kind of ending. A part of the world you have built feels like it’s fallen apart... something – or someone – you thought you could always count on (could always trust) has been taken away. Jesus reminds us that the Christian approach to these painful endings is *trust* – trust that God can create something new out of the most desolate place. Your spouse died. Your child got sick. Your marriage ended. Your job disappeared. You failed the test. You didn’t get into the college you wanted to. You gave up driving... you moved from “home” into assisted living. And right now, it feels like the temple in Jerusalem is crumbling – like your touchstone with God is falling to the ground. Then God says: Good Friday leads to Easter... death leads to resurrection... Jesus died...then he rose. And you will too. THAT is center of our faith... (not a building made with stones) but a belief that our relationship with the Risen One leads us from death to new life. Trust it. Cling to it. Live it. Share it. Jesus once was dead...*but look at him now!*⁶

Charge

Most of you know the story of Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a leader of the Confessing Church movement in Germany that opposed the Third Reich. Because of his involvement in a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler, he was imprisoned and eventually hanged. He knew it was coming... he could see the handwriting on the wall, Yet, he also knew that even the devastation being wrought by Hitler’s madness was not the end of the world.

(continued)

⁵ William Willimon, “The Things That Make for Peace,” *Christian Century*, May 6, 1987, p.453

⁶ Michael Renninger in his sermon this week found on A Sermon for Every Sunday.

So, with his life and work crumbling around him, Bonhoeffer trusts God... and this trust gave birth to a hymn a hymn which continues to reassure us that the end is not yet... and that among the crumbling temples of our time, God is faithful still.

Bonhoeffer wrote:

By gracious powers so wonderfully sheltered,
and confidently waiting come what may,
we know that God is with us night and morning
And never fails to greet us each new day.⁷

God is with us night and morning
And never fails to greet us each new day. Amen.

⁷ Translated by Fred Pratt Green, "By Gracious Powers," *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, (Louisville: WJK, 1990), #342.