

Providence Presbyterian Church
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Luke 21: 5-19 and Isaiah 65: 17-25

In the last nine years, as we have lived here in Colorado, I have served two churches. The first had sold its building shortly before I joined with them. They were physically homeless and began sharing space with another church. They continue on still as a church without their own building. The second is Providence, meeting here in a somewhat non-traditional space, a strip mall. Now, I came from the Hudson valley of NY where many of the Reformed churches go back hundreds of years. Buildings were old, and I like that traditional architecture. I like steeples. I like the timeless feel of it, standing tall as generations come and go. I miss it a little, if I am honest.

Our gospel reading tells us pilgrims coming into Jerusalem. They come to experience God in that place, the holy city, and to worship in the temple. The temple in those days would make the finest church in the Hudson Valley look like an outhouse. Some of these pilgrims came to the temple many times in their lives, perhaps others this was the first time beholding its magnificence. They were admiring the temple, Luke tells us, “how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God.” For those there for the first time, they get to see for themselves what others had told tales of for generations; this magnificent and beautiful house of Worship, and all that it symbolized, God’s blessing, God’s presence from generation to generation. So, they stand there in awe.

But Jesus chimes in. “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.” Well alright there, Debbie Downer. Sounds like the wild claims of a homeless person off their meds. “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.” Such wild claims would be deemed nonsense by most, never imagining the day when this gleaming institution could fall, could be utterly torn apart. But they listen with curiosity, or so it sounds, wanting to know what signs to watch for to know when these cataclysmic things are coming.

I do wonder what they thought of this. How did they take these comments of cataclysmic things to come, of wars and insurrections, earthquakes and plagues? Did they take Jesus seriously, that the temple, this sacred bulwark and symbol of God’s blessing, could be dismantled? For how *do we feel* when our sacred institutions get threatened; these institutions we come to assume and rely on and

understand life in relation to? For them, it was the temple and all its worship and ritual. For them it was the city of Jerusalem, that city set upon a hill. For us it may be institutions like traditional church that has endured for generations, passed down from one to the next. It may be American democracy, maybe traditional marriage and family? And what is it like to see something that takes years to build, or that has lasted for generations – to see it diminished, changed, even torn down? What emotion comes when you consider such a thing?

But what holds you together in such times, what directs and guides you?

Now Jesus' words about the fall of the temple may sound vague to us, however, the early church would read Jesus' words here with vivid imagery, for what their ancestors cherished and pilgrimaged to, had been torn down. For those in the generations after Jesus and the apostles, that bulwark and symbol of God's presence and blessing, is already gone; it has been destroyed, around 70AD, by the Romans. It is no longer theoretical. The temple is gone, and the memory and trauma of it is still fresh. As Jesus said, hardly a stone was left upon another.

It was an age of uncertainty, and great turmoil. Ruins were all around; memories of older times. To be a Christian at that time, a follower in the way, would be largely unrecognizable to us, I suspect. For this was not an easy time to be a follower of the Christ. But when you sign on to follow after a savior that was crucified by the Roman government and your own leaders, "ease and comfort" may not be what you expect.

The early Christians lived under great peril at times, and they lived with the expectation of the immanent return of Christ; that could happen at any moment. They held hope that God's kingdom of peace would at some precise moment, break into this world. And so they were called to be faithful and active. They worked to fulfill their mission of spreading the gospel, knowing that the Day was coming at any moment. The marks of being a Christian were things like faithfulness, community, kindness, discipleship, counting costs, spreading the good news.

And so, Jesus tells these pilgrims, a season is coming when you will not seek the Lord amidst beautiful stones, and gold, and memorial gifts dedicated to God. Rather you will seek the Lord, and you will seek to be faithful to the Lord, amidst great calamity. A day is coming when all you will have is the community of the faithful, and the witness of the Holy Spirit, and the stories of the one who endured suffering, and died, and was raised to life, and is seated with the Father.

Such an environment produces a different kind of Christian, I suspect. Such an environment produces a different notion of the church, I suspect, one not so much about buildings and accrued tradition, as it is about community and mission, the church as a living, communal thing.

The language used here has an apocalyptic flavor to it. It is not pure apocalyptic literature, like the book of Revelation, but it has similar imagery, a similar sense. Apocalyptic literature, in general, is written with a pessimistic view of history. It anticipates the end of the world in some great and imminent crisis, with vivid visions of cosmic upheaval. And while such writing has a future component, telling you of things to come, it is primarily concerned about the present.

And so here Jesus depicts a time of suffering, of a world which is under evil powers who afflict the faithful. But what propels the believer is the expectation that a day is coming, when they who endure will find reward, when the godless will reign no more, but God shall reign afresh in a re-created world. The purpose, the intended effect of such speech is for the present; to encourage the believers in their present circumstances, to continue their faithfulness, to persist in their patience. To be faithful to the gospel of forgiveness and grace; to be faithful to the principles of justice and righteousness, to be faithful to the call to the Love the Lord with all the heart, mind and strength, and one's neighbor as oneself.

Our Isaiah passage is also rooted in a time of distress and upheaval, when the institutions of the past are in a heap of rubble. These later chapters of Isaiah are set around the return of the exiles to Judah and to Jerusalem in the late 6th century BC. But their community ties have been compromised and they have become estranged from one another after decades of being dispersed and in exile. Those who return from having lived immersed in Babylon for a few generations can hardly relate to those that stayed in the land. Like childhood cousins meeting up decades later to realize you have nothing to talk about or agree on. The temple at that time too was torn asunder, an eyesore compared to the memory passed down of its grandeur in times past. They were in rubble, in terms of temple, in terms of a people.

But what holds you together, what directs and guides during such times?

Isaiah 65 Isaiah casts a vision for a reality different from what they have known, a vision for community and fruitfulness, a vision for a fruitful relationship with each other, with the earth, with God. It is not a vision of the past, of getting back to their former glory; it is a vision of the wolf lying down with the lamb, it is a vision of the lion longing for blood no more. It is something grander than what they have known.

But this vision is not just idyllic, or some hope that they just waited to happen. For Isaiah, the vision for a new reality is rooted in a notion of repentance and returning to the values of shalom – of peace and wholeness, of Hesed—of lovingkindness, of Mishpat – of justice for the most vulnerable; of tsedeq – of righteousness—living in right relationships with others; of Qodesh - holiness – living set apart from the world and its ways, and living faithful to the Lord.

For Isaiah this is the future hope; a new re-created world. But it is a world that comes about when God’s people live faithfully with their God, when they fulfill the law in their communities and in their relationships, growing over time.

Isaiah 58, in this same section of Isaiah that is around the return of the exiles, but a handful of chapters earlier, reads: – ...

- ⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
- ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
- ⁸ Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
- ⁹ Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.
- If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
- ¹⁰ if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
- ¹¹ The LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,

like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.

¹² Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.

In Isaiah's view, this vision of a peaceful and fruitful and secure world comes through repentance and faithfulness, and seeking justice and righteousness, through caring for the vulnerable, through building a community together, and embodying the heart of the law – to love the Lord and to love the neighbor. It is a vision for a rebuilt community more than a rebuilt architecture.

In our Luke passage, Jesus' vision has a different emphasis, slightly different flavor. He envisions a community of faith that emerges through conviction, and discipleship, and faithfulness to Christ even amidst great disruption and travail. Jesus says, "by your endurance, you will gain your souls."

In this vision, difficulty, travail, even persecution, these are not signs of God's abandonment or displeasure, but rather tools for refining and shaping and building character and conviction. "By your endurance, you will gain your souls." For is it not true that we typically regard beauty and prosperity and security and comfort as God's blessings. We will sit in a couple weeks, bellied up to a table full of elaborate food and we will give thanks. We see abundance as a sign of God, but destruction, and turmoil, and difficulty, and change, and the transforming of institutions – not usually.

But what is redeemed in this passage, and by Jesus, is that anything which produces God's fruit in our lives, by which God redeems our hearts, our best selves, which forces perseverance and conviction, by which we gain our souls, is now ordained and used of God. Anything that presses us closer to our sense of calling, our principles of justice and righteousness, our faith, to emerging possibilities of community.

In these passages, new visions of community and faithfulness emerge out of calamity and upheaval.

We live at a time of upheaval and change. Culture has changed. The church has changed. And many times, it is disorienting and unsettling. The church with its tall steeple standing on Main Street for generation to generation feels like a thing of the past. But as our gospel reading reminds us, difficulty and disruption, which

may feel like detractors, can also be used by God to continue God's ongoing endeavor – to shape and build up a people who live in relationship and faithfully. Because God's people continue on even as cultural trends come and go, even as buildings are built up and torn down.

Because you know me... that has been our stewardship theme. The notion that we would try to reflect who God is by how we carry on Christ's work. The notion that how we carry on Christ's work is inevitably tied to who we understand Christ to be. The notion that to be renewed in our commitment to Christ's work, we ought to be renewed our understanding of who Christ is, to renew our heart for and connection with the Christ we follow. Who is the Christ that we follow? As Paul says, he is the Christ who loved the church and gave himself up for her. He loved the church and laid down his life for her.

Not the church as in building with a tall steeple, but rather the community of God's people seeking to live out the faith and carry on Christ's work. The church is the community, the family of God, it can exist with or without a building, like a ? it can leave its shell and find another. And this church, a living communal organism, its threats are not like those ancient Israel faced, not enemy armies or fire or sword – these are not the things that will threaten the living church. No, the threats to this church are apathy, or hopelessness, or division. Pride, arrogance, in-fighting, stubbornness, fear, unresolved grief. These are the types of things that erode or threaten the church.

As we bring our stewardship season to a close, as we make our pledges, as we continue to prayerfully discern how God would have us serve, we remember that the Christ we follow loved the church. He gave himself up for her. And he calls us to carry on that work, as a living communal organism that is made stronger through difficulty, that is refined through suffering, that carries on as buildings rise and fall, shedding her shell and finding a new one as needed. So let us renew our commitment to that church, remembering that the church is a living communal organism, not a building. Let us renew our commitment to that church, because we know who Christ is, and Christ loved the church. He gave himself up for her.

And all God's people said...

The Glorious New Creation

- 17 For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.
- 18 But 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.
- 19 I 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.
- 20 No 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.
- 21 They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
- 22 They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat;
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.
- 23 They shall not labor in vain,
or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD—
and their descendants as well.
- 24 Before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear.
- 25 The 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.

The Destruction of the Temple Foretold

(Mt 24:1–2; Mk 13:1–2)

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.”

Signs and Persecutions

(Mt 24:3–14; Mk 13:3–13)

⁷ They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” ⁸ 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.

⁹ “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.” ¹⁰ Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; ¹¹ there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

¹² “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. ¹³ This will give you an opportunity to testify. ¹⁴ So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; ¹⁵ for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. ¹⁶ You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. ¹⁷ You will be hated by all because of my name. ¹⁸ But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹ By your endurance you will gain your souls.