

Sermon for Sunday, November 17, 2103 Luke 21:5-19 "Not Endurance But Resurrection"

Several weeks ago our acolytes went up to the Washington National Cathedral to participate in the acolyte festival. It is a magnificent place, with soaring nave, intricate carvings, stained glass windows that reach a hundred feet to the roof. I know it well, since I sang there with the Cathedral Choral Society for almost a decade. Many times, as familiar as it was to me, I simply had to look up and stare at it, the grandeur and beauty of a space dedicated to the glory and worship of God. I would imagine our acolytes did a goodly amount of looking up and staring as well. It's hard not to be overwhelmed by it all.

That image can give us an insight to the thoughts and understandings of the disciples who sat with Jesus as he taught in an even more impressive space, Herod's Temple in Jerusalem, as Luke describes.

They were sitting there in that magnificent place, so big it could hold some 400,000 people, adorned with all the jewels and magnificence that Herod the Great could put into it. They were looking up at it. The vastness. The opulence. All to the glory of God, or perhaps not, since it was Herod, Jewish client king of the Romans, who built the thing in the midst of a murderous reign where he killed his own brother to protect his throne and steal his brother's wife.

It must have been a pretty remarkable sight to those country boys from the Galilee, who might never had been to the temple before.

And here was Jesus telling them that this would all be dust. Just rubble on the ground.

There's a certain irony in Luke's telling of this story of Jesus and the disciples in Jerusalem, because when the Evangelist Luke wrote this gospel, what Jesus had said was already a reality. In Luke's time, the temple was gone, nothing more than a pile of stones, for something like thirty years. It had been destroyed in the midst of the Roman response to a Jewish rebellion in the year 70. In the wake of it, the Jews were drive out of Jerusalem, dispersed to distant corners of the empire where they presumably couldn't cause the Romans trouble. The Pharisees, those righteous opponents of Jesus' teachings who featured so prominently in the legal arguments that immediately preceded this passage, were no more.

It was the culmination of a geopolitical collapse, a religious collapse, a shift of monumental proportion.

And it was precisely what Jesus had talked about.

Or was it?

Some read Jesus' words as predictions of the end of days, the day of final judgment. All the talk of portents and omens, that apocalyptic language, what would happen when it all was over. An end to all that was wrong with the world, and a new beginning after all the dust settled.

I cannot say whether this is about then or about what will be. It certainly can be read either way. But I do know this: things happen that so completely and inutterably change the world as we know it that it is as if God has pressed some divine reset button...and this, to me, is what Jesus is talking about, a reset.

This past week we've been horrified by pictures of the typhoon in the Philippines that wreaked horrendous destruction in many communities. These scenes have become familiar to us. Building collapses, hurricanes, floods, bombs. Whether natural disasters or ones that have their genesis in human actions, awful things seem to happen with terrifying regularity. It leads some to wonder if these or the same portents and omens that Jesus spoke of, or that are spoken of so elliptically in the Book of Revelation.

It might well have felt that way to the listeners who first heard Luke's story. Many of the early Christians thought that Jesus was coming back any day, and that they didn't have to follow the rules of the communities in which they lived because it didn't really matter. And eventually they figured out that he wasn't coming immediately, and they had to find a way to live as followers of Christ in their situation.

Now, as the disciples discerned then, I would expect that the second coming is not around the corner. The bad things that are happening now are no different than the bad things that happened back then. Earthly life is not easy, not for Christians, not for anyone else.

But if Jesus' remarks are not about the End of Days, what are we to deduce from them?

First, bad things will happen. Sometimes horrendous things will happen. The world will change. Geopolitical and environmental change will continue to occur. Whatever our equivalent to Herod's Temple is, whether we think that's the World Trade Towers or the chapel at Virginia Seminary that burned down a few years ago, will become a pile of rubble. And we human beings, being creatures of hope, always say we will rebuild in the wake of such things. Sometimes we do, sometimes we don't, but it is a human instinct after these horrible things happen. When the seminary chapel was destroyed by fire, the cry went up almost immediately to rebuild a replica of that dear old space. We want to survive the bad things by rebuilding. We pride ourselves on our resilience and endurance in the wake of such things.

Hold that thought, but let's turn back a minute to the gospel: we might ask why Jesus is dwelling on such frightening things.

We know that Jesus is continually telling his followers that they are loved by their creator, his heavenly father. Is Jesus telling a scary story to get the attention of his listeners? Is he so tired of fighting with the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the scribes that he's depressed and thinks everything is just going to fall to pieces?

Or is he saying that in the frightening things that will happen there is an opportunity for something new, something better?

Is he saying that unless the old ways die, we cannot embrace his new way?

Is he saying that rebuilding old temples, like rebuilding houses on a flood plain after a hurricane, like building a copy of the old chapel despite the fact that it was too small, is a foolish exercise?

Perhaps the message is simply this: that we cannot keep doing things in old ways, those ways that may keep us from being in relationship with our Creator. We cannot simply give God a nod of the head on Sunday morning and think all is well. We cannot pray only when we are faced with disasters, but then we suddenly catch our breath and think "Maybe I need to pay attention to God now, because I need strength to get through this." Because it is not endurance that is the mark of the Christian, it is resurrection. Jesus did not merely endure the Cross, he was resurrected afterwards, changed beyond comprehension. And that is his message here to the disciples and to us, his present day disciples.

We must be willing to try to reshape our relationship with God, willing to strive to build the world that God first imagined, an Edenic place of peace and tranquility, by resurrecting that first perfect love with the creator God.

Christians cannot be people who are satisfied with maintaining the status quo or simply replicating old structures that have fallen down— we must be in the resurrection business. And if that makes us uncomfortable, so be it. Whether it is resurrecting the lives of those who are struggling in the aftermath of disaster, or resurrecting an economic system that continues to see the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, or resurrecting the souls of those who are mired in the chains of addictions, or even...

...even resurrecting our own sometimes weak and lukewarm relationship with the one who created us into something worthy of being called love, we are in the resurrection business. Resurrection is something different than mere resilience...it is fundamentally changing, not restoring. It isn't endurance, it is a pressing of the reset button.

We cannot wait until our souls are no more than cracked and jagged pieces of stone on the ground. We cannot wait until the world is no more than a place of competitive consumerism. Jesus says: "Be resurrected. Be resurrecting...resurrect love, as I am. Resurrect worshipping your God. Resurrect joy in service. Resurrect your soul."

Amen.