

Sermon: "When the Walls Came Tumbling Down" Luke 21:5-19

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH](#)

Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

IMPRESSIVE BUILDINGS

There's a Broadway musical in which the country bumpkin sees Kansas City for the first time and sings in wonder,

"Everything is nice and big in Kansas City. They've gone about as far as they can go. They got a building six stories high, that reaches for the sky, they've gone about as far as they can go in Kansas City."

In our passage for today, the disciples seem like country bumpkins come to the city for the first time. They are totally amazed by the size and scope of Herod's Temple. It took forty-six years to build and the building was quite impressive. They said in wonder,

"Would you look at the size of those stones?"

Back in their hometown of Galilee a big building was two stories high, a few stones held together with mud and prayer.

But, this temple was glorious.

More than that, this temple was symbolic of their nation and their faith.

SYMBOLIC BUILDINGS

An equivalent landmark in our age might be the capitol building and the great monuments in Washington, DC. These are more than just big buildings. They represent who we are as a people. These monuments express the accomplishments and sacrifices of our past. In addition to that they represent our ideals and our hopes for the future.

People come and marvel every day at these great stones and what they represent. During special days, like Veteran's Day that we celebrated last Thursday, these monuments become especially important.

THE THREAT OF TERROR

Now suppose someone came to our capitol on a national holiday, stood in front of the Lincoln Memorial as the visitors reverently passed by and said something like,

"You see this great monument? It's going to be totally destroyed. There won't be a stone left in this place. You just wait and see. America doesn't have much time."

Unfortunately, imagining someone saying that doesn't take as much imagination as it once might. We are all too aware of the threat of terrorism. Statements like this would arouse hatred and suspicion in a hurry. In fact, if someone would say something like that, they would probably be shipped off to the FBI for interrogation!

Well, that's exactly how it must have been when Jesus proclaimed to those marveling at the fine stones of the temple, "... the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." Luke 21:6 (NRSV)

That was a very threatening statement to the people of Jesus' day. They had already experienced their own "911" when the Babylonians came and destroyed the first temple, Solomon's temple. To suggest that this grand new temple started after they had come back from exile would be destroyed was just too much to bear.

When the Jewish authorities arrested Jesus one of the accusations they made at his trial was in essence that he was a terrorist. He had, after all, made this prediction about the destruction of the temple. In their eyes Jesus was obviously anti-God and anti-country because he had said this.

KILL THE MESSENGER?

The same is true today. If someone gives us a message that we don't want to hear, a message that tells us that our most cherished institutions will not go on forever, how do we respond? We want to persecute or even kill the messenger.

We reply to the naysayer, "Don't tell me that these fine stones will be thrown down. Don't tell me that my way of life will come to an end. I don't want to hear it."

And yet, I believe that is God's message to us even today. Nothing lasts forever, not even the stones of a great building and not even a great and powerful nation like ours. In time everyone and everything falls.

We may not like it. We may even decide to arrest and persecute those who proclaim it.

But, it is still true. The "way of all flesh" is the way of disintegration and destruction.

Nothing is written in stone. Nothing lasts forever.

THE LESSON OF CHARLEY

The building in which we worship has been here for a long time, since the 1880s. It was well built by people who knew what they were doing. I have seen pictures which show that even before the first courthouse was built, this church sat proudly in the middle of our little community.

But, this summer, after hurricane Charley, I was not sure it would still be standing. I held my breath as the car rounded the curb. I passed by houses that were terribly damaged by the storm, and huge limbs in the middle of the road made it difficult to drive. I could just imagine what those big oaks in the front of the church might have done to our building.

Fortunately, the church building did survive. But, it could have easily gone down. Trees could have fallen through the roof instead of going in a different direction. This church building that has stood for so many years and has been the home to so many pleasant and significant memories could have been nothing but a memory had things not have gone our way.

One day it will happen. One day even the oldest and most significant building in town will be destroyed.

OUR DAYS ARE NUMBERED

And just as the days of every nation and building is numbered, so our days are numbered as well. Do you remember the words of the Psalmist? He wrote,

“So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.” Psalm 90:12 (NRSV)

Everything and everyone are temporary.
In time, all this will come tumbling down. In time we will come tumbling down. It is a sobering thought.

I was talking to someone who was having a roofer put new shingles on his house. Like everyone else he was annoyed that it was so expensive and that it was such a long and messy process.

In his frustration my friend rather impatiently told the roofers,
“I want quality shingles this time around. I want something that will last.” The roofer replied, “We guarantee these shingles will last for 30 years.” Then he added, “These shingles will last longer than you will!”

My friend said, “You know, it does something to you to realize that an asphalt shingle is more immortal than I am.”

We don't like to think about our mortality or the temporary nature of the institutions that we serve.

CHURCH CLOSED

I got a letter in the mail several years back that one of the very small churches I had served many years ago was finally closing its doors. It was in a very rural part of Virginia and mainly served a couple of farm families that lived in the area. Even when I served that church on a part time basis, I was amazed that they were still holding on.

But, over the years I have found that churches do not die easily. Even when it is obvious that there is no hope for the future, they will fight to keep the doors open. Why? I guess there are a number of reasons. Some want to preserve history. Some want to preserve family tradition. Some are just plain stubborn.

But, there is something else as well. For many, the church building, like the Temple, is symbolic of the presence of God. It is supposed to withstand every storm. It is supposed to be there when all else fails. The very idea of a church failing is a sacrilege to some

I can appreciate the warm feelings many people have for the institutional church. But, our fascination with large stones and powerful institutions can make us forget the real reason the church exists.

The church is not a building but a people, a community of saints both living and dead whose goal is not to perpetuate ourselves and our way of life. The church is a community whose only goal is to proclaim the kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

LOOKING FOR THE CITY OF GOD

Jesus reminds us that one day even the broad beams of this building will fail. One day even the most impressive stones will be turned upside down by the unexpected winds of life. We should not trust in things that are temporary. And when you come right down to it most everything in life is temporary.

Faith must be based on something that is more permanent. Faith must be based upon a greater foundation than the large stones of an impressive temple.

I am reminded of a famous passage in the New Testament book of Hebrews. In that passage the great heroes of the faith are being lauded, and especially the father of them all, Abraham. According to that book, the greatness of Abraham's faith lay in his desire to seek what was permanent instead of that which was temporary.

The writer of Hebrews wrote of Abraham,

"By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. [10] For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God." Hebrews 11:9-10 (NRSV)

We need an Abraham-like faith. We need to seek the city of God, and the true temple of the most high.

TENTS VERSUS BUILDINGS

Do you remember how God's people first worshipped after they were liberated from slavery in Egypt? They worshipped in tents. I think that's significant.

A congregation that worships in a tent is on the move. Worshipping in a tent is recognition that we can't manage the mystery that is God. God has places for us to go and things for us to do.

But, we always want to manage the mystery. The tent became a temple, a permanent fixture with elaborate furniture and complex rituals. And over time people began to worship the place more than the God the place represented. People began to worship a man made doctrine instead of the God given hope.

The same thing still occurs in our churches today. We have a tendency to worship what is temporary instead of what is eternal.

So, sometimes it's necessary for the temple walls to come down. Sometimes it is necessary for us to be shaken at the very foundation of our hearts and lives.

I believe that sometimes a false temple has to fall so that fresh forms of faith can rise from the ashes.

COVENTRY CATHEDRAL

At one time Coventry Cathedral lay in ruins, destroyed by German firebombs. But, years later a stunning new structure rose from the ruins, a global witness to peace and to resurrection.

Engraved in the floor near the entrance are these words:

"To the Glory of God this cathedral burnt." And just outside, carved on the old burnt-out walls, a promise: "The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former."

And the latter glory of our lives will be greater once our idolotrous temples are destroyed.

THE TEMPLE OF FEAR

What is that temple which needs to come down today? I would suggest one possibility. Perhaps it is the temple of fear.

Today when many people speak about the next terrorist attack, it is not a matter of “if” but “when.” Much of our national treasure is now being spent on trying to figure out the “when.” We call this process the gathering of intelligence.

Jesus spoke of the temple’s destruction, and his disciples were also anxious to know “when” it would happen. They wanted to know so that they could escape the coming destruction.

But, Jesus disappoints them (and us). Jesus said that knowing exactly “when” it would happen didn’t matter because they were not called to run away. Following Jesus is not a matter of running away nor is it a matter of suggesting that God will destroy our enemies for us.

No, the God revealed in Jesus Christ presents a totally different image of salvation. God as revealed in Christ defeats violence by suffering our violence. God as revealed in Christ defeats death by suffering our death. God as revealed in Jesus Christ defeats sin by becoming sin for us.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LIVING TODAY

There are definite implications for how we should live today. We no longer have to respond to terror with terror. Why? Because Jesus has shown us that He can conquer even the most terrifying possibilities. Like Jesus, the disciples of Christ are encouraged to go right into the heart of the storm with a message of calm and hope.

Did you notice what Jesus told his disciples in our lesson for today? Jesus said something like,

“Yes things are going to get bad, just like the doomsday prophets have been saying. There will be wars and rumors of wars. There will be earthquakes, famines and in Central Florida there will be multiple hurricanes. Some people like Carl Sagan will say that the sky is falling.

Don’t worry about all this because you’ll have bigger fish to fry. Remember how they treated me? They’ll treat you the same way. Even family members will betray some of you.

But, don’t worry about any of that either. God’s Spirit will give you the words to say when the time comes, and you will be a witness for me and for the gospel. It’ll all work out for the best. Just wait and see.”

Now, Jesus’ words weren’t idle words. When Luke wrote his gospels many had already been persecuted and even martyred for the faith. Indeed, Luke’s second installment on the gospel story, the Acts of the Apostles recounts the fulfillment of the persecution that Jesus predicts here.

But, it is also a story of triumph. Despite all the persecution, they were able to overcome and bring the gospel to the ancient world. Even in the face of death, they knew that in the final analysis, what Jesus said was true. Not even a hair of their head would be harmed. They did not fear death because they were a community formed by resurrection power. (See Matthew 10:28; Luke 12:4)

These disciples learned that in the light of God’s salvation in Jesus, they were not overcome by the darkness. They did not have to meet violence with violence. There was a better way.

LOSING OUR LIFE TO GAIN OUR SOUL

And as modern disciples of Jesus Christ, we must learn a better way as well. In Jesus' day there were doomsday prophets who always emphasized the negative in life. Today we call them news reporters, politicians and sometimes even preachers.

They attempt to whip up hysteria about almost anything in order to get what they want from us. Much of the violence, racism and religious demagogery of our world can be attributed to the shallow and self-serving analysis of these so called leaders. They are the ones whom Jesus spoke about, the ones who claim to be from God but who are really from somewhere else. (Luke 21:8)

We cannot fall for their obvious ploys. We give our allegiance to a different leader who calls us to preach a message that is out of step with what many are preaching.

We are called to break the cycle of violence and hatred with a hope that is eternal, a peace which passes all understanding and a commitment to non-violence as a way of life. We are called to give up all temples and even our own life, trusting instead in the eternal grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. And it is through this giving up, this losing that we gain our soul.

This End Time truth about gaining one's soul comes through in these words on suffering by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It was written shortly before the Nazis hanged him in April 1945:

O wondrous change! These hands, once so strong and active, have now been bound. Helpless and forlorn, you see the end of your deed. Yet with a sigh of relief you resign your cause to a stronger hand, and are content to do so. For one brief moment you enjoyed the bliss of freedom, only to give it back to God, that he might perfect it in glory.

May we resign our cause to a stronger hand. May we learn the freedom that comes from being a slave for Christ.

Amen.