

23rd Sunday after Pentecost, Year C – Luke 21:5-19
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church – Sedona, AZ

Faithful Fellowship

“The time is near. . . Do not be terrified.”

We have all heard these predictions from various sources; that the end of the world is near, or that things are changing so fast that the world as we know it will be unrecognizable, if not completely destroyed. Some predictions will cause anxiety and fear, while others will inspire relief and celebration. Some predictions are realistic, while other are intentional exaggerations. What we do know as an honest fact, is that change is inevitable; and what we don't know is what it will look like.

In today's Gospel from Luke, we hear Jesus foretelling change. He is warning his followers to not get too attached to worldly goods, especially their ostentatiously adorned temple. This is not the first time that Jesus has predicted an event that was bewildering to his followers. In looking at the context of today's Gospel reading, we are close to the end. The end is near. Jesus has already entered the city of Jerusalem on a donkey and was honored by people spreading their cloaks on the road and waving branches as he passed by. Jesus has already foretold his death and resurrection three times, but his disciples are mystified by this prediction. After Jesus enters Jerusalem he weeps over its present and future condition. He sees people selling things in the temple and becomes angry because they are making it a den of robbers.

He denounces the scribes who walk around in long robes, take the best seats at banquets, and devour widows houses. The beautiful stones and gifts that adorn the temple only serve to draw people's attention away from the activities of corrupt religious leaders. In Jesus' eyes, the temple is already in a state of decay. And it won't be long before the temple is completely ruined.

While Jesus' current listeners interpret his message as foretelling the destruction of the temple, some may be in denial about this truth, while others question Jesus about what signs to watch for – as if they can be prepared, as if they can gain some sense of certainty, as if they can control or maybe even prevent such a devastating catastrophic event. But those who first heard Luke's Gospel a generation later had already lived through some of the chaos and turmoil that came with the temple's destruction. They are going out and testifying, as Jesus also predicted. Testifying that God saw them through difficult times of transition. Encouraging their friends, neighbors, and strangers about the promise of God made known thorough Jesus. That all things will be made new because Christ transformed a painful ending and brought them to a place of hope and new life.

In our own lifetimes, nations have engaged in wars, relationships have been damaged by arguments large and small. Homes, towns, farmlands and coastlines have been destroyed by natural and human-made disasters. Our own temples, churches, governments, and commercial buildings have been

ruined inside and out by fraud, greed, and violence. Certain industries are dying and being taken over by others. Even churches and styles of worship are changing. Yet through all of life's challenges and uncertainties, Jesus is reminding his followers to not lose heart. To persevere and have faith in God's promise to abide with us, and to trust that God can create something new out of the most desolate places.

But Jesus doesn't stop there in his teachings. He knows that his followers will be persecuted and even killed. And now, as he heads toward his own death, Jesus speaks of resurrection. He speaks of resilience and endurance. And while some may hear Jesus' message as personal encouragement to keep the faith in times of hardship, he is also directing his community of followers to stick together and proclaim their faith in the world – to testify to the truth of God's promise; to risk persecution, oppression, or just plain criticism for the sake of the Gospel – the Good News that God always sees us through difficult times. That God not only sees and hears us, and is present with us in our troubles, but that God is active through the hearts and hands of those around us – in our own faith community and in the good works of others who are kind, compassionate, and respectful.

This is the center of our faith – that the temple of God is within us and all around us. That the Body of Christ is all of us. That the church, or the temple, or mosque is not where God lives. God's presence, and attention, and

activity is made known through us in all that we do and say; in our thoughts and prayers, and actions. Our testifying and our testimonies are critical to the spread of God's message of love for all that God creates. Not just those who think like us, or pray like us, or vote like us. God's message of love is for all people at all times and all places.

This is a challenging message to hear and it is a challenging message to live into. But it is also a hopeful message for all of us. For who here has not received God's love when we least expected it? Who here has not been offered forgiveness when we least deserved it? Who here has not experienced new life after laboring through times of darkness or thick fog? In every generation, ordinary people are challenged by hardships in which it feels like their world is falling apart: the death of a loved one, an illness inflicts a child, a marriage ends, a friendship is betrayed, a business downsizes, or an inexplicable medical diagnosis is received.

Through all of life's changes and challenges, Jesus calls us to remain not only faithful and resilient, but also to remain creative, imaginative and adaptable. There have been many articles in recent years about mainline churches being in decline. That the secular world is distracting people from religious life. And that our houses of worship and church schools just don't look like they did back when we were kids. But then there are other articles and blog posts and social media memes that push back and ask us why they

should. Why should today's churches and congregations look exactly like they used to in the 50s? And if they shouldn't, what should they look like, and what could they look like? We in the Episcopal Church are wrestling with these questions as much as other mainline denominations. But we are not willing to throw out the baby with the bathwater. As Episcopalians we honor scripture, tradition, and reason. We value ancient rituals and contemporary practices. And we stand firm in our belief that the Spirit of God continues to inspire us to live faithfully, to look beyond this point in time, and trust that by our endurance, by your holding on, we will gain our souls. We will gain new life.

During this stewardship season of Gratitude, we are sharing testimonials from St. Andrew's parishioners. We hear how the fellowship sustains us in difficult times. We see that we are a loving faith community. We experience the people of our church as an extension of our families. And we are drawn nearer to God in our shared ministries and are encouraged and strengthened in our faith.

Our call to faithfulness continues through our own struggles, and through our being there through the struggles of our neighbors. And our call to faithfulness continues until that day when Christ returns.¹ All the way through to Christ's long-awaited second coming, and thorough all those in between times in our lives when Christ has returned for us and given us

¹ http://download.luthersem.edu/media/working_preacher/podcast/691WPBrainwave.mp3

second and third and fourth chances; when Jesus has shown up and given us a new sense of hope. When God gave us words and a wisdom that none of our opponents were able to withstand. When the Spirit pushed us to do something we didn't think we had the courage to do. When the faithfulness of God overcomes all of the injustice, betrayal, and oppression that humans inflict or imagine. This is what we believe. This is what we testify to. That we and others may experience the cross of Friday being transformed to the "truth of awesome Sunday joy"² in our daily lives and at the end of the ages.

+ + +

² Walter Brueggemann. *Prayers for a Privileged People*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press (2008), Prayer of Illumination, 179.