

LUKE 21: 5-19
WUC NOVEMBER 17, 2013

“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?”

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 defence 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 or your head will perish.

By your endurance you will gain your souls.

What are we to make of a text like this?

Ignoring it is tempting. Isaiah is a lovely text. We could have a good time with Isaiah. HOWEVER.

Ignoring difficult scripture passages,

Just because a text is difficult, and perhaps challenges our own world view, is not a reason to abandon it to those who would use it for their own purposes.

You can't tame the word of Life; defang it, declaw it so the furniture of our comfortable, and stylishly monochromatic spiritual buildings won't get ruined.

Well, we CAN, but - we won't.

Why?

Because that would fail to take the scriptures seriously as the jewel that they are

And because it is the experience of the church that uniquely and consistently we encounter the living Word of God in these writings, I say let's dig in.

Please notice I did NOT say that these are the words of God (chiseled by a Divine hand into King James English on a tablet of stone)

but rather
that we experience the Living Word of God as we engage these words.
Does that make sense to you?
The Spirit speaks through these writings, when we encounter them together.
and it's my calling to break open the Word –
not with a flat earth approach
but genuinely break it open
and I have found, with thousands and thousands before me,
that it's like a stone you find in the road that looks one way on the outside but – when broken
apart, shines with unanticipated beauty, reflecting light in surprising and graceful ways.

So – let's start chipping away at this and see what we find, shall we?

Last week we heard the prophet Haggai speaking to the people as they were trying to rebuild a temple
demolished by Babylon.
And here we are again talking about the Temple.
A good place for us – is to remind ourselves of some of this history – what IS the Temple, and what
Jesus is talking about.

As briefly as I can, then:

For centuries the people of Israel were geographically unsettled. Wandering – taken captive in Egypt,
freed by Moses and Miriam, wandering more....finally entering a land they believed God had promised
them. Centuries go by. Under King David they become a unified, solid and strong country. It was under
these favourable conditions that David and Bathsheba's son Solomon builds the first Temple. He had at
his command many resources; human and otherwise. The temple was a thing of beauty and riches –
you can read about it if you like, in _____

They believed that God dwelt there. The Temple was the centre of religious life – THE place to
worship, and the home of God.

In 586 BCE Babylon comes in, takes the country, captures the people, drags them off into captivity in
Babylon and....

destroys the Temple. Flattens it.

For 70 years they are there in Babylon – mourning and crying and dreaming and singing their pain.

“By the rivers of Babylon....(sing it)

Into this comes the prophet we call second Isaiah, who starts out his message with these words

COMFORT, COMFORT YE MY PEOPLE, SAYS YOUR GOD....

They listened, dreaming and singing about the time when God would do just what Isaiah said – lead
them home again, triumphantly across the desert. The desert would bloom and it would be just like the
Exodus, when God parted the sea and the people were freed by God's strong hand and mighty arm.

Well....

70 years went by and finally Persia conquered Bablyon and Cyrus their king, let them go home. Not
exactly a triumphant parade, but God is most often in the less gaudy don't you find? More subtle – and
as captives, we take what we can get, right? . Nevertheless they went home. Isaiah went so far as to
call Cyrus the Messiah – but that's for another sermon.

They went home.

When they got there, nothing was the same. Nothing. The land was ruined, the people who had been left behind were demoralized and resentful of those who returned....think your way into the psychology of that...it was terrible.

They argued about what to do first and began to build the temple. That seemed like an obvious first step.

They did not have at their command the resources Solomon had...it was nowhere near the grand thing they had remembered. Ezra says that when the foundation was laid, they called the people together to rejoice that they had got that far....the young ones cried out in joy and the old ones, who remembered the first temple, just cried. And, he says, you couldn't tell the cries of joy from the cries of pain....

isn't that a sad, rip your heart out kind of image? Again another sermon, - but the young folks greeting the foundation of the new with joy and the old ones...remembering how it used to be, crying for what they knew now was gone...forever?

Rip your heart out, that.

Ah but it's not over. It's never over...which perhaps is, in the end, the message in all this!

But here's what happened next. They finished the second temple, eventually, and religious life resumed with the Temple as the place where God was to be found. That's an important thing to remember. The Temple as the place where God was to be found.

Fast forward.....now it's the 1st century BCE....just before Jesus' time. Rome is now the oppressor du jour. Herod, essentially a Roman puppet, becomes ruler in Jerusalem and decides to do a little reno. To impress his bosses in Rome. He completely renovates the Temple, digging into the mountain....made it huge, sparkling, it took 46 years, they say. The thing was huge, and rich and showy...just what a ruler would want. How did he pay for it? Taxing the people of course. Heavy, crippling taxes.

But was it where God was to be found? There were those among the people who asked that question. And who did this temple serve, in the end, with its taxes and so on...

who did it serve in the end? They were still under the thumb of Rome....resentment simmered and politics was volatile...and there was, shall we say, mixed feeling about the Temple – questions about where God really was to be found. John the Baptist, many others. Jesus is born into this and lives his life in its upheaval.

Finally, there was an uprising, and in the year 70 Rome comes in and guess what destroys the temple.

AGAIN.

That's the last time there was ever a temple in Jerusalem.

Many of the faithful wait still for it to be built again.

I know this is long but I want you to hear a bit of what that final destruction was like.

Rome encircled the city with a stone wall, blocking it so no food or water could enter. Then they just waited. When the people were starving and weak, Titus moved in and burned everything and everyone. The people who could, fled to the Temple and finally the flames took the inner court, the Holy of Holies, where God dwelt....and the treasures of the temple were paraded through the streets, in victory

– including a copy of the Torah. The victory of Rome was complete. The temple was gone.

Why am I telling you all this?

Here's our reading from today – and it's important to know that LUKE IS WRITING THIS AFTER THE TEMPLE HAD BEEN DESTROYED. Not long after. Does that change how you hear this text?

The Gospel of Luke is an astounding work, in so many ways. But this author is writing the Good News Of Jesus of Nazareth

with the smell of the burning, still in the air. The very dust they breathed, included remnants of the Temple -

they were inhaling daily the remains of what had been meant to last forever.

And what is the good news in that?

That is what Luke sets out to tell us. IS there good news when everything is gone? IS there hope, and where is God when everything you thought and hoped for and believed is in ruins?

Luke has a story to tell. It's about Jesus of Nazareth. And, Luke says, if you're looking for hope, if you're looking for the place where God dwells, look to him.

This is not to trash Judaism....many of the prophets also preached that the place God dwelt was not in the temple but rather in the world.

Luke, writing in the aftermath of the horror in Jerusalem that took the temple down, includes the Temple in his telling of Jesus' story. More than the others do. Enough to make you go “hmmmm”. The temple is almost a character.

Only in Luke for example, do Mary and Joseph take the new baby to the Temple at 8 days. And there, old Anna and Simeon recognize him for who he is. They, who had served the temple all their lives, now say “at last I see God's fulfilment in this child”

Only in Luke does the young boy Jesus go – where? To the temple – to discuss with the teachers and impress them. He was 12 years old Luke says.

And on it goes.

Even this passage, also reported in Mark and Matthew,

Luke sets it in the temple. Matthew and Mark set it on the Mount of Olives.

Luke and his community had seen these things happen. They were not predictions of an unknown future but....alive in their memories, in their hearts. The question: Where is God to be found – was very real

And now, what did God want of them? What way forward when it's all gone?

Luke's unwavering answer is
that though the Temple is gone
God is present.

God is present in the life and work of the man Jesus of Nazareth
whose life and death and continuing presence with them testifies to the fact that life prevails
and that the Holy One, the giver of life and mystery that moves the sun and the stars

the Holy One abides - and cannot be destroyed -
a cruel and destructive army cannot
family troubles and divisions cannot
the betrayal of friend cannot
wars and earthquakes cannot

because the power and presence of the Holy – the force of Life, the movement of Love – the Lord God
of hosts
the power and presence of God is wild - and free - to which
we, with the structures that we build, physical and otherwise
give but temporary shelter.