

## Discern The Time We Live In

Texts: Isaiah 65:17-25

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 (Series C. 20th Sunday after Pentecost) Isaiah 12

Luke 21: 5-19

Prayer:

St. Paul Lutheran the church where I once was a minister now stands vacant in Morse, Saskatchewan for past 27 years. The pulpit, where sermons were preached week after week, stands lifeless. Where the small but committed choir once sang anthems, there are a few old broken windows cracked foundation concrete.

Long ago prayers were offered in that place, now the roof is just about cave in. I, and others, saw it coming, of course. The population was not increasing in this farming community. Some people had moved away. Finally, the congregation was so few in numbers that they were forced to make the decision that they had hoped to avoid.

They left the building and moved on themselves, some of them joining other congregations in other communities. It was a wise choice; it was the only choice...and yet, every time I visit Saskatchewan I was drawn to pass through that community.

I was once a pastor, and can't help but feel a kind of sadness. At times, deep sadness. After all, the gospel was preached there..... people were baptized there, confirmed, and married there, ...funerals were held there.

Once that building was the center of worship and life for a congregation of God's people. Yesterday a house of God. Today, ruins in an empty building. And so I find it possible to identify, with the musings of those unidentified speakers who appear in the Gospel lesson for today. I **understand, to some degree their shock and reactions.**

Our passage opens, with admiring the great temple in Jerusalem, a holy, magnificent, and inspiring building. Whatever respect and sense of sacredness any Christian congregation in our age may give to its sanctuary, these people of Jesus' day gave to their temple in the extreme.

I visited *Nikolia Grundtvig's Church*, Bispebjerg, near Copenhagen, Denmark several years ago. In the stillness of the late morning, as I walked towards the main body of the church, I could hear the beautiful sound of the pipe organ resonating throughout the sanctuary. Slowly I edged forward with a camera in hand as I gazed at the chancel altar down the highly vaulted nave, and its beautiful stained glass windows.

I became almost overwhelmed by the sheer holiness of the place. That kind of experience, and I'm sure some of you may have had, conveying the sense of awe that the temple evoked in Jesus day.

After all, for the Jew, the temple was the centre of the spiritual universe... the sign that God had not abandoned them. It was in the temple that the time-honoured prayers were said each day. ...It was in the temple that sacrifices and sacred offerings were made; ...it was in the temple that throngs crowded the courts for the annual festivals.

'This temple is the still point in the universe', they were claiming,' the one place of *stability* in a shifting and uncertain world. Rulers and empires may rise and fall, generations may be born and die, but time cannot destroy this place, because this is the very symbol of the presence of God'.

"*What noble stones!*" they said in Jesus' hearing. But Jesus provided a moment of shock for them when he said: "*Every stone here will be thrown down to the ground,*" "*There won't be one stone left standing on another, not one.*" Jesus was making a theological claim, and a shocking one.

He was not just describing what would happen to a certain building in Jerusalem, he was describing what would happen to the way these people viewed the world and God. If the temple were shaken, -- their faith would be shaken, too.

If the temple were destroyed, -- their theology would be destroyed along with it. If the temple were to fall, -- their world would fall as well. But the word from Jesus was clear:

*"Not one stone will be left standing,"* he said. What do we do when our *faith world* is destroyed? What do we do when the noble stones of our temples are reduced to rubble?

What do we do when the holy places where we once worshipped God become deserted or vacant shells?..... Of course,..... our temples are not always buildings. Our temples are whatever structures we erect in our minds, our imaginations, or our hearts and that hold our faith together...that firmly remind us of how it is with God and the world.

*Finance* can be a temple. A treasured relationship can be a temple. *Family* can be a temple. A *creed* can be a temple. *Theological systems, national pride, economic programs, our jobs* and *self-images* can be temples, too, These are not bad things. Indeed, they are good things because they give us *stability, security* and a *sense of meaning* as people.

As long as they stand, everything is OK. But having said that, the gospel reading for today suggests that we must be prepared to hear Jesus' verdict upon all humanly constructed temples: *"Not one stone will be left standing upon another."*

What do we do when our temples tumble down? What do we do when our world comes apart? Sometimes when our temples are destroyed, our response is to attempt to put the stones back exactly the way they were.

*"Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant"* is a novel by the writer Anne Tyler. In it there is a scene in which a young boy named Luke is standing beside the highway hitchhiking.

He is hitchhiking in part because he wants to see his relatives in a distant city, but he is also hitchhiking in order to run away from home and his troubled family. Three motorists give him rides, and all three of them are people whose temples have been destroyed, ...whose worlds of meaning have come apart, ...and who are trying to put the stones back in place. But it cannot be done.

When a temple is destroyed; *when a family, or a job, or a church, or a vocation, or a theological system, or a sense of personal identity* falls apart; when a *little world* comes to an end, only a new world can be born. The old can never be restored just as it was.

This was the response of the people in our text. If the temple was on the verge of destruction, what then is left to hold on to? Not so said Jesus. Temples fall at every tick of the clock.

Wars take place, famines happen, tumult occurs. Loved ones die, jobs end, dreams vanish. And every generation will have its so-called prophets who cry out at such a time, *"It's over! Give up! The world is finished!"*

But according to this gospel reading, such is not a time for despair. It is a time for testimony. When little worlds come apart it is a time for disciples to roll up their sleeves and to be about the merciful work of the kingdom. When families begin to break, it is then, more than ever, that disciples are needed who bear witness to trust, forgiveness, and love.

When government programs collapse and homeless or frightened people are cast into the streets or into unsafe settings, it is then, more than ever, that disciples are needed who proclaim in word and in deed that the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

When the church becomes weakened and the numbers grow small, and the seductive power of the world seems unassailable, it is then, more than ever, that disciples are needed who fearlessly bear witness to a vision of faith.

"What would you do," someone is reported to have asked reformer Martin Luther, "if you knew that the world would come to an end tomorrow?" "I would plant a tree," said Luther.

In other words, he would go on doing the steady and hopeful work of a disciple. Worlds come and go, temples rise and fall, but the kingdom of God and the work of discipleship endure.

In the meantime, we who inhabit this planet are called not to abandon the world. Instead, the call to live out our time in faithful discipleship goes out to all of us, ... to all who believe that the future is God's future..... and therefore, can be entered without fear.

For most of us, the actual way we bear witness to such a gospel in the midst of uncertainty and adversity ... is by seeking to be faithful in our daily routine: ...to be a loving parents, ...to seek peace and justice in our relationships and work places, ...to do our jobs as -bank tellers and factory workers, - homemakers, teachers and therapists, -sales clerks and medical workers, -athletes and librarians -as police officers and judges -as social workers and secretaries -as care-givers and mechanics ----to do these and other jobs with integrity and sensitivity, with courage and compassion, ----to care for those in our midst who are lonely, excluded, fearful, hungry, sick, or forgotten, ----and to do what we can to reach out beyond those "*in our midst.*"

In matters such as these, small as they may seem, is our witness to the power of God's love strengthened. The miracle in all of this is that doing what we have been given to do, is enough. "**And,**" said Jesus, "*it is by such patient endurance that you will save your lives.*" That is the wisdom of faith.

Temples will rise and fall, churches will be born and die, little worlds will be formed and come to an end, but the work of discipleship goes on---steady, faithful, enduring to the end. Amen

October 23, 20122