

Sermon: God rebuilds our Temple

When preparing a sermon, I try to avoid repeating the scripture reading that we have already listened to for fear someone might get bored. Today however, in order for us to grasp the implications and meaning of the message, I will be repeating them again.

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."

Then they asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" And 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 defense 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 of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.

We may not like it, we may deny it, we may resist it, but the reality is things are changing. Our world is changing, the church is changing, our lives are changing.

Sometimes changes are welcome. But there are days when change brings loss or the fear of loss. There are days when our life is forever changed, the world is different, and nothing is like it used to be.

You and I know those days. We could each tell stories about those days. They are stories about the death of a loved one, the diagnosis, a divorce, the business that failed, the job that was lost. They are stories about the day you realized the life you were living was not the life you wanted, the day someone confronted you with your addiction, the day you became the parent and caretaker to your own parent. They are stories of dreams and hopes that never came true.

These are the days when the temples of our life and world fall. It is not just our individual temples, however. As a congregation we are having to face the reality that our church life is changing. Membership has dwindled, youth don't bless us with their presence very often, and as hard as we try to attract new congregants, sometimes it just doesn't happen.

For many people the Presbyterian Church is not the church they remember. It is not like it used to be when they were growing up. Things have changed. For them it may feel like the temple is falling.

As a country the temple of our economic system is in ruins. We can no longer count on investments that will grow every year. The job market is unstable. Globally we read of wars, plagues, famines. Nations have risen against nation, kingdom against kingdom, even religion against religion. Security, peace, and diplomacy have given way to fear, violence, and terrorism. Temples are falling everywhere.

We all have temples. Some have been given to us, others we have built for ourselves. Sometimes our temples are people, places, values and beliefs, institutions, dreams. Regardless, they are the things that we think structure and order our lives, give meaning and identity, provide security and stability. At least we think they do, until they fall.

In today's gospel some were speaking about the temple, its beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God. It is what structured their community. It gave identity and meaning. It was the center of Jewish life. Jesus looks at it and says, "The days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." Jesus is speaking about more than just the physical temple in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem temple includes every temple you and I have.

So what do we do on the day our temple falls?

Change has a way of pushing us into the future. Many people will begin looking for signs about the future.

What will happen now? What do I do? How do I get through this?

If we are not careful, we will soon be living in a future we do not yet have. We will be living in a future created in our heads. That is not Jesus' response. When Jesus describes things that will happen, he is not asking us to speculate about the future. He is offering signs that call us to be faithful in the present.

Sometimes, after our temple falls, we look for a scapegoat, someone to blame or even demonize. So we blame Muslims for violence in the world and gay people for the conflict within the Presbyterian Church. Liberals and Conservatives blame each other for the misgivings of our economy and country.

We look for someone or a group who does not think, act, or believe like we do. That is not Jesus' response.

Some people will simply give up and walk away in despair. They can see nothing left. All is lost and the situation is hopeless. That is not Jesus' response. Some will become angry, resentful, and fight back. Others will say this is God's will or maybe even God's punishment. Many will look for easy answers, quick fixes, something that will prop up the old structures and ways of doing things. Again, these are not Jesus' response.

Jesus' response is just the opposite. Be still, be quiet, do not be led astray. Do not allow your life to be controlled or determined by fear. Do not listen to the many voices that would cause you to run and go after them. Endure he says. Be faithful, steadfast, persevere here and now.

Jesus is calling us to be present and faithful in whatever circumstances we find our selves. If we cannot find God here, in our present circumstances, even amid our temple ruins, we will find God nowhere.

The place of fallen temples is the place in which God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, declares: “I am about to create new heavens and new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it or the cry of distress.”

Those promises are fulfilled through our endurance. By endurance we gain our lives, our souls. Jesus is calling us to the virtue of stability. We are to remain fully present, faithful, no matter how uncomfortable life may be. In so doing we discover that God has always been with us – in the changes, chances, and chaos of life; in the pain, loss, and disappointment; in the destruction of our temples.

Endurance, perseverance, stability are the ways in which we offer God the fallen stones of our temples. Stone by stone God rebuilds our life. Stone by stone God restores the original beauty of our life and world. Stone by stone a new temple arises from the rubble. Stone by stone we become the temple of God.

We no longer have temples. We no longer need them. We are the temple. That is the story that needs to be told. That is our opportunity to testify.

We can all tell the story of the day our temple was destroyed. Too often, however, we believe and live as if that is the end of the story. It will be if we run away, scapegoat, respond with anger, or try to put it back together like it used to be.

But it does not have to be the end of the story. The greater story is how we discovered God next to us in the temple ruins and how, stone by stone, God rebuilt what we could not. It is the ongoing story of God recreating life out of loss and ruin, a story of God rejoicing and delighting in his people.

This story is the holy gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to you. It is real, sacred, and true. Trust that story, tell it over and over to yourself, proclaim it to all you see, and then go live that story. Amen