

Luke 21
2025

Nothing is Permanent

November 16,

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, ⁶“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.”

⁷They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” ⁸And 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.

⁹“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.” ¹⁰Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; ¹¹there will be great earthquakes and in various places famines and plagues, and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

¹²“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. ¹³This will give you an opportunity to testify. ¹⁴So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance, ¹⁵for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. ¹⁶You will be betrayed even by parents and siblings, by relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. ¹⁷You will be hated by all because of my name. ¹⁸But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹By your endurance you will gain your souls.

This is the difficult word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The disciples were marveling at the temple. Last week, we read the passage in Haggai in which the prophet told the people who had returned from Babylonian exile that they should get to work on the temple and not just rebuild their own homes. And for about five hundred years, their work had stood. It was a humble place. A fraction of the size of Solomon’s temple, but it was a house of worship.

Then, the Romans came. They did not worship at the temple, but they did allow the Jewish people to continue to worship there, and they set up a loyalist as king - Herod "the Great." Herod's father had been friends with Julius Caesar, and Herod undertook several big building projects - including expanding and enhancing the temple around the time Jesus was born. The project lasted several years.

Therefore, when the disciples arrive in Jerusalem and see the temple, they are wide-eyed and impressed, pointing out the grandeur—the beautiful stones, the lavish detail. In fact, Louisville Presbyterian Seminary Dean Debra J. Mumford writes, "The temple was beautiful . . . the work had been done very well. The rebuilding project had taken many years to complete and included new foundation walls through which Herod had significantly enlarged the temple. [So, it was bigger than what Haggai's crew was working on but still smaller than Solomon's original temple.] Sparing no expense, he had employed the most talented artisans to use the best materials for the project such as white marble that was up to sixty-seven feet long and twelve feet high. Blue, scarlet, and purple Babylonian tapestries made of fine linen formed a veil at the entrance.¹ He had installed gold and silver-plated gates and gold-plated doors throughout."

It was a moment of awe for the disciples, most of whom came from the backwoods of Galilee and were not familiar with such building materials. They had admiration for human achievement, for the sacred space that had been brought back to the beauty spoken about in the lore of Solomon's Temple. This newly completed project was being called "Herod's Temple." But in that moment, as they are taking it all in, Jesus interrupts with a jarring truth: "The days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

It's a hard pivot. From admiration to devastation. From stability to collapse.

And it's not just the temple. Jesus goes on to describe wars, earthquakes, famines, plagues, betrayals, arrests, and persecutions. The world will shake. The faithful will suffer. Families will be torn apart.

Ugh. What a downer!

Herod may not have been a prophet or a godly king, but he had brought glory to the temple. It was magnificent. Its fabrics and stones, its gold shimmering in the sun. It was the symbol of God's presence, the center of worship, the pride of the people.

But it was also a political project—Herod's attempt to curry favor, to project power, to stabilize a fragile reign. And Jesus saw through it. No amount of marble or gold could cover the truth. Jesus saw that the temple, for all its beauty, was not eternal. Human structures—whether religious, political, or cultural—are vulnerable to collapse.

We live surrounded by temples of our own making. Institutions we trust. Systems we rely on. Buildings we admire. But Jesus reminds us: nothing physical is permanent.

This is not a call to despair. It's a call to clarity. To recognize that our ultimate security is not in what we build, but in who holds us when it all falls apart.

Periodically, we remind ourselves that the church is not the building, it's the people. It's you, and you, and you, and now we add little JC to the team. COVID taught us that we were still the church as we worshipped virtually. We know it, but my friend Rachelle has learned the lesson in a more difficult way.

On December 28, 2020, an awkward holiday season of grief and masks and six feet of separation, after a traumatic year in which multiple people of color were killed by law enforcement officers, and families were cancelling travel plans and waving to each other on FaceTime and Zoom instead, Rachelle and other church members began receiving phone calls in the pre-dawn hours that their church was on fire. The sanctuary destroyed. It was not an electrical fire or a gas line. It was no accident. Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Presbyterian Church was intentionally set aflame by a white supremacist who also slashed car tires in the area around the church and wrote that he wanted to "eliminate all [African-Americans]."

The church, a Presbyterian church that identifies first and foremost as a "community" church in Springfield, Massachusetts just reopened its sanctuary a few weeks ago. For almost 5 years, they have worshipped in temporary space, and as a fellow Community, Presbyterian Church we rejoice that they are back in a place of worship they can call home again.

Can you imagine what church would be like if we didn't have our campus or its resources for five years? If we had to meet in borrowed space? A school cafeteria or another church building on a Sunday afternoon when they weren't using it?

But the people of MLK Church clung to God and each other. They know better than most of us every could that a church isn't a building, it's the people. The building is just a resource that allows the church to worship together and feed one another and sound beautiful, but this bunch of steel and sheetrock and paint is not the church. Rachelle is on the Presbytery's Strategic Planning Team, responsible for casting a vision of what we might do in our corner of the world, and I'm so excited to hear from someone who has endured so much and knows so clearly what it means to be the church in these days.

Because even if the church building burns down, the church endures. Even if Herod's Temple falls, and it did, the faithful – both Jews and Christians endure. In fact, between the time that Jesus arrived in Jerusalem in around 30 CE and the time that most scholars think that Luke wrote his Gospel around 80 CE, the Romans had destroyed the temple, and they were persecuting the Jewish people and the followers of Jesus, too. But well, here we are. They didn't destroy the message.

But it certainly shook the disciples that day. They want to know when these things will happen. They'd feel a lot more comfortable with a timeline and a plan. When to get the heck out of dodge. When to stock up on toilet paper and milk. That kind of thing. Same as us. We crave certainty. Especially in chaos. We want someone to tell us what's coming, what to do, how to fix it. But Jesus doesn't offer certainty. He offers presence.

He doesn't say, "Here's how to avoid suffering." He says, "I will give you words and wisdom when you are brought before kings." He even says, "Make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance." What!?!? That's just madness. Preparing your defense in advance is why I have a Costco membership and a basement!

Preparing for the apocalypse has become big business. Commercials air constantly about getting the right defense lawyer, preparing to live off-grid. Get solar

panels. A walking stick that has a fishing line and compass and fire-starter and spear built in.

When I was in Texas, I met a woman who sold apocalyptic survival shelters. She worked for a company that was based in the Texas panhandle where there was a history of very damaging tornadoes. Most Texas homes do not have basements, so people would buy tornado shelters, but the company had realized that there were many people out there more worried about zombies and nuclear holocaust and being invaded by foreigners. So, they pivoted their messaging and were making a hefty profit helping people prepare their defenses.

But Jesus says, don't focus on your own defense even as he does not promise anyone an easy life. Instead, he says, "take up your cross and follow me." He says, "whoever lays down his life will gain it." He says, "the last shall be first and the first shall be last." And in our final verse in today's reading, he says, "by your endurance you will gain your souls."

Endurance is not passive. It's not just surviving. It's active faithfulness. It's choosing love when hate is easier. It's choosing truth when lies are louder. It's choosing hope when despair feels more honest.

Endurance is the long obedience in the same direction. It's the daily decision to trust God, even when the stones are falling down and the powers that be question and threaten you.

And it's not something we muster on our own. It's a gift. A grace. A presence that meets us where we are.

There is a time to build and a time to tear down. Last week, Haggai said, "Build the temple." This week, Jesus says, "It will all come down, every stone."

So the question for us is: what do we marvel at? Do we marvel at the stones—the buildings, the systems, the successes? Or do we marvel at the God who endures? The Christ who walks with us? The Spirit who speaks through us? The church that has survived thousands of years of persecution *by* others, persecution *of* others,

colonialism, slavery, pandemics, technology changes, shifts in theology, electric guitars, scandal, and more.

Do we marvel at the architecture, or do we marvel that God continues to be faithful to us? Do we marvel that another family has trusted this church community to embrace their infant son and claim him as a part of the family of God? I think that's pretty marvelous to me, and I give thanks to those who endured so we could all be here today. Amen.