

## Keeping the Faith at the End of the World

This morning's Gospel passage might remind musical comedy fans of the song, "Everything's Up to Date in Kansas City," in which an unsophisticated cowboy from the Oklahoma territories describes the marvels he witnessed on a trip to the nearest metropolis. "They went and built a skyscraper seven stories high, about as high as a building ought-a grow...". We can imagine the disciples, those country boys from Galilee, gawking up in wonder at the Temple. "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" The Temple soared above the city from its perch on Mount Moriah, the site where Abraham proved his devotion to Adonai by taking his son Isaac to be sacrificed. The Temple was designed to impress upon everyone who saw it the majesty of Adonai and the strength of his chosen people's faith. Judging from the disciple's awestruck comment, the design was a spectacular success.

We should remember, though, that this was not the first Temple to stand on Mount Moriah. You'll recall from our readings a few months ago that King Solomon built a magnificent Temple there centuries before. Solomon's masterwork towered over Jerusalem for about four hundred years until the Babylonians conquered the Hebrews, forced them into exile, and tore the first Temple down in 586 B.C.E. It wasn't until seventy years later that the Hebrews were permitted to return to Israel. That was when they built the second, smaller temple on Mount Moriah that so impressed Jesus's disciples.

Jesus probably knew the Temple's history, whether his disciples did or not. He doesn't seem to have been especially impressed by it. He replied, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." Jesus's prediction came to pass in 70 C.E., when the Romans lost what little patience they had with Jewish rebels and decided to really assert themselves. They besieged Jerusalem, slaughtered the citizenry and

ripped down the Temple, scattering those enormous stones for miles in every direction. Only the portion of the foundation that we now know as the Western Wall was left standing. To the Hebrew people, the siege of Jerusalem and destruction of their beloved Temple must have seemed like the end of the world.

To judge from conversations with friends, news reports and social media, a lot of Americans feel that way about the recent Presidential election. If you're on the winning side, you may be looking forward to the changes ahead. If not, you may be anxious and grieving, shocked by friends and family members who chose to vote the other way and mourning the loss of a status quo that, while admittedly imperfect, seemed comfortable and safe to you. You may be afraid of what's coming and angry that your life is about to be turned upside down without your consent. Few people enjoy sudden change, especially when it's forced upon them. And societal change isn't the only kind that can seem disastrous. Anyone who has ever experienced the loss of a loved one, a marriage, a home, a job, or a limb knows what it's like to live through a catastrophe. Maybe the entire world didn't come to an end, but your personal world changed beyond recognition, and that's enough to traumatize anyone.

So perhaps it's fitting that we look today at the passage some Bible scholars call "the Little Apocalypse." Having followed Jesus up the Mount of Olives, Peter, James, John, and Andrew privately asked him when the Temple would fall and what warning signs they should look for. Jesus didn't coddle them with assurances that things wouldn't be all that bad or suggest that the Father might ease up if his faithful people just prayed hard enough or perfectly obeyed the Law of Moses. Instead, Jesus told them that the coming tribulations must take place, warned them not to be misled by false prophets, and characterized the wars, earthquakes and famine ahead as "the beginning of the birthpangs." Our lectionary spares us the worst of his predictions,

but they're pretty dire, and a great many false messiahs have used them over the centuries to terrorize Christians worldwide.

As 21<sup>st</sup> century readers, we're in an odd position. On one hand, we know even more than the four favored disciples because we know about Jesus's Resurrection and the hope for eternal life that springs from it. On the other hand, we don't know what our immediate future holds any more than the disciples did, and we aren't able to sit down in person with Jesus to ask for clarification, much less reassurance. But the Holy Spirit preserved Jesus's words for a reason, so we must contemplate what they mean for us whenever the world seems to be coming to an end, whether nationally, globally, or in our own small lives.

One thing we know for certain is that the world in which we've been living bears little or no resemblance to the Kingdom of God. If Jesus's teachings on the Kingdom aren't enough to convince you, take another look at the Song of Hannah, which we sang together this morning. A childless woman living in a culture that prized children above all else, Hannah suffered humiliation for years. But her faith never wavered and, in the Father's time, Hannah gave birth to Samuel, the great prophet who anointed and advised King David. Hannah's Song joyfully describes the Kingdom of God as a place where the Lord brings down the arrogant and uplifts the poor and needy. Our world has not been that place. So, love it or hate it, perhaps the world we created has to come down to make room for the Kingdom to come.

We can legitimately wonder why the coming of the Kingdom has to inflict so much pain on so many people. Are the wars, the earthquakes, the famines that Jesus foretold really necessary? Perhaps. But we make a mistake if we allow ourselves to believe that God will cause the suffering that Jesus predicted. War, injustice, environmental degradation, and famine are all products of human greed, stupidity, bigotry, and violence. That means we're faced with a choice.

Historically, humanity has dealt with cataclysmic change and conflict by hunkering down into our tribes, arming ourselves to the teeth, demonizing our opponents, and fighting to our collective last breath to preserve whatever we have. That approach hasn't served us well. Perhaps it's time to try something new.

Several journalists have helped me understand that people with whom I disagree on various issues think of my political party as a pearl-clutching, hypercritical fainting society. I don't see things that way, but I have to admit that people who do aren't likely to be persuaded by anything my party's leaders have to say. Speaking our truth to those people might be satisfying for us, but it won't be effective and it might provoke them to do even more outrageous things to antagonize us. That might be satisfying for them, but it won't be productive and it won't do anything to minimize the pain of people who are going to suffer if Jesus's predictions play out.

Instead, regardless of our party affiliations, we can take our direction from the letter to the Hebrews and step forward in faith into whatever future awaits us. We can still have difficult conversations – we can't and shouldn't avoid them – but our goal should be to provoke each other not to anger and arguments, but to mutual understanding, love and good deeds. And we can remember to meet together despite our disagreements and encourage one another in our Christian faith, the better to care for those who will be most in need as our nation changes around us.

One way or another, the world is always coming to an end. The same Roman Empire that tore down Jerusalem's Temple fell itself less than five hundred years later. The British Empire, upon which the sun once never set, dwindled as its colonies claimed their freedom. The once-mighty Soviet Union collapsed with startling speed in 1991. Nations and empires rise and fall, devastating some people and delighting others. Our task in the days ahead is to keep the faith, be Christians first and do our utmost to clear the way for the Kingdom of God to come. Amen.