

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
By Eric Howell
"The Temple"
Luke 21:5-19
November 14, 2010

Lots of people made pilgrimage to the Temple and the surrounding courtyard; and they did all kinds of things at the Temple: prayed, gave money, made sacrifices; some people did business, made deals. We heard this morning from Jesus, sitting out front of the Temple with His friends. They were doing what everyone did when they came to the Temple. People did all kinds of things at the Temple. But the one thing that everyone did at the Temple was marvel at it. It was a beautiful sight to see; the highest building on the highest peak, of the highest hill, adorned in gold; the holiest place in the holiest city, in the holiest nation. Everything that everything else was about was represented by this place. Just to be there was to have your breath taken away.

There was a well-known saying: Whoever did not see Jerusalem in its splendor never saw a delightful city in his life. Whoever did not see the Temple when it stood, never saw a magnificent structure in his life. b. Sukkah 51b

So, now we join Jesus there at the base of this place. With His disciples we marvel at the Temple. And Jesus replies. "All that you see here, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." This was a sobering warning about that which had stood strong for over 400 years in its reconstruction, and 400 years before that by the hands of none less than King Solomon himself.

Then Jesus says, "It's all coming down." He goes on to paint a picture of the kind of trouble that His followers will have. The destruction of the Temple is just one small part of something much bigger --- "Nations against nations, kingdoms against kingdoms, earthquakes, famines, pestilence, terrors, great signs from the heavens."

And then, it gets personal.

"You will be persecuted, delivered to the religious and state authorities. You will be turned on by your parents, your brothers, relatives, and friends, and some of you will be put to death."

Students of history will immediately recognize that Jesus' words proved prophetic. The Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D., by the Romans. It would never be rebuilt and hasn't been rebuilt to this day. Within 40 years not one stone of the Temple that was there that day remained on top of one another.

However, it would be a mistake to limit our understanding of Jesus' words to simply a one-time historical event, no matter how cataclysmic it was, and no matter how prescient Jesus was in understanding what was to come. This is about more than just the events of 70 A.D. It's more than just interesting, but far-removed history. It

would also be a mistake, though an understandable one, to try to lay these words as a template over modern-day current events as if Jesus was foretelling the end of the world in news reports of warfare, earthquakes, and famines. It makes best-selling fiction, but it doesn't make particularly good theology. More importantly, neither approach makes good Christians. We are not made good Christians by bracketing off the scary words as disembodied history. We are not made good Christians by fearfully applying them to whatever crisis we face as if each one was the next end of the world.

The power in this apocalyptic prophesy for them there and us here is in the contrast of its message with the Temple standing nearby. The Temple, with all of its history and beauty, stood for everything being right in the world. It was an enduring testimony to the existence and power of God's people, and the presence of God with them.

Seeing the Temple standing was an assurance that God was still with us and God was still in control. As the prophet Habakkuk said, and sometimes we sing, "The Lord is in His Holy Temple. Let all the earth keep silence." We like our reassuring institutions. They assure us that everything is still rightly ordered in the world, and by that we mean, we are still on top; still right, still safe, still in the right place. It is reassuring to faith, when faith grows accustomed to this scaffolding. Contrast that with Jesus' words: in everything it's a picture of being out of control. Not only is the Temple torn down stone-by-stone, but everything else that we can trust in is upended as well.

In the world Jesus asks us to imagine, we are subject to geopolitical conflict . . . nation will rise against nation. Subject to metaphysical cataclysm: kingdom will rise against kingdom . . . Subject to the natural forces of the world . . . great earthquakes, famines, pestilence. Subject to mysteries from the sky . . . terrors, great signs from the heavens. Subject to religious authorities . . . you will be brought before synagogues . . . Subject to secular forces . . . you will be brought to prisons, taken before kings and governors for My Name's Sake. What will you do when all the walls in life come tumbling down?

Fred Craddock wrote about this, "As strange as this literature may seem to us, it is a dramatic witness to the tenacity of faith and hope among the people of God. Amid painful and prolonged suffering, when there can be seen on the horizon of predictable history no relief from disaster, faith turns its face toward heaven not only for a revelation of God's will but also for a vision of the end of the present misery and the beginning of the age to come. (Luke, 24:3).

In every conceivable way, Jesus is describing an existence in which you are out of control. Everything around you that might have given you shelter has crumbled. Everything predictable has gone haywire. In one world, the Temple stands, the earth stays still, the seasons do their thing, nations and armies stay home. It's life as most of us know it most of the time. But now picture yourself in one of those little snow globes that gets shaken up, and your world turns upside down?

But there's more than random chaos. It's not just a picture of being out of control of the forces of the world. It's a picture of those forces all in alliance against you.

Everything is against you. You are all alone. Everything around you that might have protected you, buffered you, made life easier, has turned against you. That's the world Jesus tells them to prepare for. Not just chaos; conflict. Not just uncertainty; persecution.

There are Christians in the world today experiencing life and living their faith under intense persecution. In nations all around the world men and women believe in and follow Jesus as best as they know how surrounded by people who stop at nothing to stop them. As we pray today for our brothers and sisters around the world, I am particularly mindful of the Christians I have met who have suffered terribly for their faith. For Radu in Brasov, Romania, whose church was watched by the government spies as they came out. Some of them disappeared from their homes and were never seen again. The records of their lives -- birth certificates, school records, were wiped out. It was as if they never existed. The ones who turned them in -- family members. I remember Khem Ktul, who lived with his family in the jungles of Vietnam and Cambodia for years fleeing from their pursuers.

Closer to home we aren't usually in this kind of danger for our faith. It's not always easy to be a Christian in the board room or at the job site, but the ones who bear the brunt in our society, it seems to me, are our students. It's hard to try to be a Christian in middle school or high school; the social pressures, the temptations, the insecurities within everyone that often turns into mocking and pressure on the one who is trying to be a bit different than everyone. It can be a tough time in life.

Sometimes that feels exactly like what Jesus is describing -- like nothing is on your side, like no one is for you, like you are all alone. Christians have experienced this for all time and in all places.

Our usual response? We try to build stronger walls for our temples. We try to soothe the earthquakes, win the culture wars, insure against the spiritual famines. We try to blunt the impact of engagement with a hostile and oppositional world. But sometimes this doesn't even work and we are brought face-to-face with the hard realities of the way of Jesus.

Everything that we have that makes it easier to be a Christian and practice our faith is a luxury, not a prerequisite to our faith. Christians have not and do not have to live in friendly contexts to be Christians.

I'm aware of two Christians in another time and place, fellow church members, a pastor and lay person, who were in a disagreement about the role of patriotic demonstrations in Sunday worship; whether to fly an American flag in worship, sing patriotic songs, and so forth. As you might imagine, churches in America approach this issue in all sorts of ways.

The pastor didn't think that demonstrations of national patriotism had a place in a worship service, insisting that worship is about God, not about national identity, and that Christianity is a people across all nations, not just about allegiance to one

nation. So, posting an American flag in the church, singing patriotic songs in worship, recognizing national holidays as a church weren't happening.

The church member said to the pastor, "How can we not honor our country and our troops who are fighting for our freedom and risking their lives, many giving their lives for us so that we have the freedom to live our lives, practice our faith and worship as we desire. If it weren't for the flag and for our troops, you couldn't preach the Gospel at all. We wouldn't have this church."

The church member was right to remind the church that we do indeed in America worship in a privileged position, bought with the blood of men and women who defended our nation and the intellect and courage of men and women who crafted this nation to be what it is, including freedom to worship. We are free to build our church buildings, sing and preach, share our faith here without the overt threat of losing our lives for it. It's not that way everywhere and we should be grateful. Some in our very own congregation today have put your lives on the line in ways that many of us only play in video games or see in movies. We owe you our lives as we live them.

The lady was right. But she was also totally wrong to say, "if it weren't for our freedoms we couldn't worship or witness." The Gospel does not require friendly or even benign politics to be preached. Two millennia of evidence show that the church does not demand a friendly world to be the church. In fact, the church is often at its best when it is persecuted. Christians are not just Christians when it is easy or when they can do so without repercussions. Even if every stone at DaySpring were toppled over, not one stone from our altar, standing one on another, we would still be a church for one another in the name of Christ; shame on us if we were anything less.

But we aren't. We are the church of Jesus Christ, disciples of the One who chose a suffering path and told us that His steps lead to a cross. If we follow in His steps, then, don't be surprised if there is a price to be paid.

There are things more important than a student's popularity. You can sacrifice that if you have to. There are things more important than a business man's career. You can sacrifice that too if you need to. There are things more important than your bank account, your possessions, your social standing, more important than our buildings. Anything we build with our own efforts will someday topple. And any of our lives may be required of us. There are things more important than our lives, things worth dying for. That's what Christians believe. We believe that there's something worth dying for. And today, we are thankful for all of those who have died for it. And we are thankful for all the little deaths we have experienced in all sorts of ways in our own lives as Christians, because each time we died to ourselves, and to the world just a little, we became free to be more alive in Him.

There comes a time in the lives of most Christians, wherever you live, when your faith will be tested, and tested hard. There will come a time when it seems like you are completely and utterly alone. This should not be a surprise to anyone. Jesus said it

would be exactly like that. He said, if you will be My follower, take up your cross and follow Me. And He didn't mean that Christians will wear gold necklaces with cross pendants. He, and the first disciples understood the stakes. Following Christ would possibly cost them their lives.

It did for many of them. Almost all of the first disciples were martyred in some way.

When that time comes in your life, when it seems that everything is against you and you are all alone, that is the time to be a Christian. That moment is your moment. Jesus said, "This will be your opportunity to witness." Isn't that something? It's not when everything is going great and we have successfully engineered our world for God that is a witness. It's when all of that is taken away from us and we are left standing there, alone, with nothing but our prayer and our faith, however much faith that is. That is your opportunity to witness. Witness -- the same word as martyr. It's the moment when our faith matters before a watching world. Everything else we do as Christians -- our worship, study, formation, spiritual growth, community, service, prayer . . . it's all for that moment in just the same way that all of Jesus' life pointed to the cross.

Thanks to God that in that moment, when it comes, amidst the fear and uncertainty of it, that you are not alone at all. God is in His Holy Temple -- you.