

Isaiah 65:17-25

Canticle 9

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19

Many years ago, actually eons ago, when I was in college, I remember sitting in an Economics class and frantically taking notes about things that I barely comprehended when the professor said something that stopped me in my tracks. I don't even remember now what he was talking about, but all of a sudden I heard him say, "The only constant in life is change!" Well, I didn't want to hear that. There I was at the beginning of my life making all kinds of plans based on all kinds of dreams and working out in my own mind exactly the way I wanted things to be. I mean, I had control over all that, right? Well, apparently not. I was so thoroughly annoyed to think that I could work for months and months, perhaps even years and year, getting things exactly the way I wanted them only to find out that as soon as I got them that way, they would change. Well, that's discouraging. If everything I do is going to change, why bother? I was really annoyed. After all these years, that's the one thing I remember about my economics class. I don't even remember the professor's name. But I still remember what he said and I still don't like change.

We hear Jesus speak this morning about change....about dramatic and devastating change. Jesus is talking to his followers who are standing in Jerusalem gazing at the Temple with a sense of awe and adoration. The Temple is the heart of Jewish life. Built by King Herod, the Temple is an enormous architectural feat. Herod is quite the builder and he wants to keep the Jews happy to avoid any insurrections or unrest that would reflect badly on him in Rome, so he builds this amazing structure for them. While the Jews have mixed feelings about Herod himself, they do love the Temple he built. Jewish law dictates that the Temple cannot be any larger than the dimensions God gave to Solomon for the building of the first Temple, but that wasn't big enough for Herod. He had a much grander structure in mind. So he laid a huge area the size of five football fields and he made a perimeter with quarried stone...each one roughly the size of a boxcar. And then he filled in that area with dirt to make the foundation...the Temple Mount...upon which the Temple itself was built. The courtyard could hold tens of thousands of people which it did when the city swelled with Jews flocking to Jerusalem for the Passover each year. And on the eastern wall of the Temple, Herod put plates of gold that would reflect the sun. It was magnificent.

Jesus' followers are admiring the Temple when Jesus begins to tell them about its destruction.

All of these stones will be thrown down. Not one of them will be standing on another. They are devastated just thinking about what Jesus is saying. Why, that's not possible! How in the world could the Temple be destroyed? It's huge and it is glorious and it is the center of Jewish life. It is the place where God dwells in the Holy of Holies. It's unthinkable that anything could happen to the Temple. The people love their Temple. It is not only the heart of the city, it is the heart of their lives. For anything to happen to the Temple would be for their world to come to an end. But that's exactly what happened in 70AD...about 40 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. It was destroyed by the Romans who desecrated it before they demolished it. The people hearing Luke's gospel for the first time might actually be able to remember when the Temple was destroyed, so to them, Jesus sounds like a prophet in this story.

The people in this story who are listening to Jesus want to know when this unthinkable tragedy is going to happen, but Jesus doesn't tell them. Instead, he warns them not to be led astray by people claiming to be the returning Jesus.

And he tells them that if they are his followers, they will be persecuted. They will be brought before kings and governors. They will be handed over to synagogues and prisons because they believe in Jesus. People they love and people they thought loved them will betray them. But Jesus tells them not to worry. Their arrests and imprisonments will give them a chance to testify about Jesus. And they don't have to worry about making any preparations for their defense. Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will tell them what to say when the time comes. And what they say will be so wise and so profound that no one will be able to contradict them. Some of them will even be put to death.

So far, none of this sounds like good news to me! What Jesus is describing is terrifying. It's upsetting. It's dreadful. Jesus also tells them that there will be wars and insurrections; nation will rise up against nation; and there will be earthquakes and famines and plagues. But don't be afraid Jesus says. On our best day, if we were filled from top to bottom with the Holy Spirit, I'm not sure we could manage not to be afraid!

But wait a minute. The natural disasters...the floods, the earthquakes, the famines and the plagues as well as the wars between nations have been happening in every century since Jesus lived and walked on the earth. And Jesus says these are the things that are going to happen before his return...before the kingdom of God replaces the earth. So what's Jesus point here? The message to us is the same as the message to those who were listening to Jesus then. We won't know when the end is coming and neither did they. It's not for us to know...any more than we are going to know when our time here on earth is finished. It comes like a thief in the night, so Jesus tells us to be prepared *always*.

But Jesus does give us the good news in the midst of all these terrifying predictions. Jesus says to them and to us...when these things happen...not a hair of your head will perish. You will be safe with God. That's the good news.

Even now when we think about the end of the world...the second coming of Jesus...we know that we have already gotten glimpses of that. Each one of us in this room has had a time...or perhaps more than one time...when the world we knew...the world we lived in...came crashing down around us. It might have been the death of a parent or the death of a spouse or maybe it was the death of a child or a best friend...someone who occupied with us the world we lived in. And when they died, the world we knew fell apart. It crumbled around our ears. But it might not have been a death. It might have been a marriage that we thought would last forever, but didn't. Maybe it was the loss of a job or someone in a position to know telling us that we weren't good enough to pursue our dream...we didn't have what it takes. Maybe we somehow lost a great deal of money...resources that we had thought would take care of us in the future. There are all sorts of ways when our world can blow up.

Jesus knows that and he tells us...do not be afraid. This creation of God's...the one we are a part of and the one we contribute to...is an ongoing process. It's messy. Creation is always messy. And it's uncertain. Even if we are the one doing the creating, we're never quite sure how it's going to turn out. God tamed the unruly forces of nature in the creation of the world and perhaps that struggle is still going on. The unruly forces continue to rear their ugly heads and God continues to tame them.

Jesus is telling us to trust God...when we do not know how things will turn out. Jesus has assured us that not one hair of our head will perish...no matter how bad it gets. And when it gets bad...when our own personal worlds blow up and fall apart, we begin again. The creation continues. We rebuild. We develop a new dream. We sink our hearts into new relationships. We begin conserving our resources again for that inevitable rainy day. We will never be able to put things back the way they were, but we can build something new...something that could not have existed had the old world not come crashing down. Painful endings very often result in new and abundant life.

We are God's creation partners and God is our creation partner. We don't rebuild without God's help and steady hand. And God allows us the free will to alter some of God's creation as well. Jesus' point is that we should never give up. We should never lose hope. We should never lose sight of who is ultimately in charge...it is God, not us. And the endurance that Jesus encourages us to use...the endurance that saves our souls... is not through our own strength

alone, but through the grace of God. We are able to endure because God is always with us. The Holy Spirit is filling us. And Jesus is walking alongside us. Hold onto that trust. That's the bedrock of our faith. It is the one thing that lasts...the one thing that will not blow up...the one thing that will not crumble.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.