

“Changes”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
23rd Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 28C) – 16 & 17 November 2019
Luke 21:5-19

There’s no way for us to know how people felt when they saw the Temple in Jerusalem, what it was like to walk those stone pavements, with the faint smell of incense in the air, and the overpowering stink of animals lined up for sacrifice. But we can imagine how the place crackled with intense spiritual energy, inspiring awe and excitement and fear, for here the presence of God dwelled like nowhere else on Earth. That pulsing rhythm of the sacred could have put the chill down anybody’s spine.

Now some of us have gone to places like our National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., or St. Paul’s in London, or St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome – all wondrous spaces that take your breath away. Their glory brightly reflects God’s glory. They stand as a testament of sacrifice, to the joy of offerings devoted to God’s purposes. Each in their own way strive to emulate the Temple, yet no matter how ornate or holy, they all fall short.

Still, imagine how you’d feel if someone you knew and trusted, someone wise and powerful, said that each, indeed all, of those buildings, including our family home here at St. Luke’s, would be razed to the foundations in the not-so-distant future. At first, I think there’d be unbelief. That’s simply not possible. Then perhaps a twinge of anxiety. What if it **is** true? How our lives would change! And after some thought about how we might stop it, a desire to know when this would happen. What clues will we have that this terrible thing is about to start? And then as reality sets in that we can’t stop it, that it’s destiny, we’d feel some anticipatory grief. Something we adore and cherish will soon be no more.

That's probably how people felt when Jesus predicted that the Temple, which they'd just been admiring, would be torn apart. It's a little surprising that they immediately took Jesus at his word, but many of them had watched him perform miracles, listened to his parables that opened up new horizons of thought and possibility. So they just wanted to know when, and Jesus gave them a horrifying list of events that would occur prior to the Temple's downfall.

Fake Messiahs, who declare "I am the chosen one," with their arms raised to the heavens. War and rebellion on a global scale. Starvation, epidemics, earthquakes. They would be betrayed by those closest to them, hated and persecuted because of their faith. Once Jesus stopped talking, the Temple coming down was probably the least of their worries. The whole fabric of their lives was going to unravel, and there was only way out: deny Jesus; forsake the faith.

How many did that is anybody's guess, but in 70 A.D., near the end of a failed rebellion, with the ground muddy with blood, the Romans took the Temple down, stone by stone, a wasteful act of raw arrogance and vengeance, their attempt to destroy the identity of an entire nation, to crush their very souls. With the Temple, God's dwelling place, ruined, where was God now?

Of course, it didn't work. People mourned their losses, surely some had doubts, and others likely faded away, but Judaism adapted. They changed how they worshipped, how they related to God. Their common suffering became a source of shared healing, a force that bound them together as never before, as a people determined to endure, always with the hope that the day of cruel desecration would one day be followed by restoration, by justice.

And the disciples of Jesus did, too, spreading the Gospel like little tendrils of hope, infiltrating the Empire that, at first, wasn't sure what to do with them, but which eventually

decided that this new faith that was changing people's lives, changing their habits and loyalties, constituted a threat that demanded a forceful response. Hideous lies were told about the early Christians. Many were exiled, tortured, or killed. Obviously, it didn't work, because here we are, but how?

In the midst of listing the terrifying things to come, Jesus sprinkled in a few promises. First, those who were captured and questioned would receive from Jesus "words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict." They didn't need to worry about what to say, and what a relief that had to be.

Knowing that a conflict's coming, we often rehearse the conversation in our minds. We try to hone our arguments as sharply as possible, to anticipate what our opponents will say or do. It can be maddening, an obsession. But when we're being confronted by enemies of Christ, there's no reason to worry. Jesus has us covered. We will be given the words of witness that will reveal the truth that Christ's love overcomes hatred.

Second, Jesus assured his faithful followers that "By your endurance you will gain your souls." Now this doesn't mean that by hanging tough, the disciples would somehow earn their way into heaven. Instead, by staying open to Jesus and relying solely on him, by receiving his wise words and proclaiming them during times of great struggle and peril, they would receive as a gift what had been lost to sin. But it's more than just about what happens after we die. To gain one's soul happens in the here and now, too. But what does that mean?

To gain your soul means that you've given it to Jesus. *To gain your soul means that you've given it to Jesus*, who dwells within you, making you a Temple of God's presence, more glorious than any building ever could be – glorious yet humble and grateful for the opportunity to serve as a witness to God's much greater glory. A light shines forth from the soul inhabited

by Jesus. Some people are attracted to that light. Others, living in darkness, are repulsed by it. But those who give their souls to Jesus find peace, fulfillment, belonging, joy – more than could be described. It can only be experienced.

Desirable as this is, though, many say no, and it's hard to blame them, because when Jesus comes into your life, a lot of things change, and we have mixed feelings about change. It kindles both fear and excitement, and the proportion of those two visceral emotions is determined by how we view the change, how much we like or don't like it.

Take getting engaged, for example. When I proposed and Stephanie said yes, I was so excited. "This is the best day of my life. I'm so blessed that this awesome woman accepts me for who I am, wants to spend her whole life with me. It's going to be wonderful." At the same time, down on one knee, I couldn't help but think, "What if she says 'no,' or perhaps even worse, 'let me think about it?'" This is the biggest decision of my life, and this choice will affect my entire life in ways that I can't predict right up until the day I die." On balance, excitement won the day by a large margin, but sometimes fear does, and it paralyzes us, makes us indecisive, or ready to run from or fight that change.

At its least disruptive, change can be inconvenient, causing us to devote time and energy to this instead of that, when actually we're quite fond of "that." It challenges long-held, cherished assumptions about how the world works and our role in it. When we let Jesus into our lives, theology trumps ideology, and our perspective shifts as a new vision comes into focus. Change can also be risky. To let go of one thing for another, there aren't any iron-clad guarantees. Just faith, and the hope that the new will bring more meaning and fulfillment. And change can be painful.

When I came here over five years ago, I was scared and hurting. Was I excited to start a new life with you? Extremely excited. But I left behind hundreds of people in Virginia, some of whom I'd served and loved for over twelve years. At our farewell party, the parish gave me a basket full of letters, over 100 of them, telling me what my work there meant to them. It was an amazing, moving gift, and it took me two months to start opening them. Once I finally started reading them, it was really tough.

I came here, our family made that change, because I felt deeply that's what God wanted, and I have no regrets. I'm convinced now more than ever that we belong together, but with the change came pain and grief and some remorse, and if we ignore that part of how Jesus affects us, then that's how we'll tell the story to others. That will be the witness we'll give, a sanitized version of Christian life, where it's all sweetness and light, and one of two things will happen. People will just flirt with faith, won't make the necessary commitment, and end up fading away, or they'll figure out what we left out, and not be too happy about it.

When faced with the radical change that Jesus brings, it's natural to ask "why should I make that change?" And to answer that question, we need to ask and answer several more, with unflinching honesty, "Is this the best life I can live, or is there something more?" "Do I want to settle for happy, when true joy is within reach?" "Is optimism enough, or would hope be better?" "Am I OK with being content, or would the prospect of deep and abiding peace be worth taking a risk?" "Shall I stay small and safe, or let God work through me to accomplish greater things for His glory?"

Many of us have asked and answered those questions many times. It's not easy, and sometimes, our responses change. Faith is not a steadily rising line on a graph. But the more we choose Jesus, and accept both the good and bad that comes with every change, the more we

begin to perceive a vision not only of a new life, but of a new world. It's not change for the sake of change. It's change for the sake of Jesus; change for the sake of those who suffer from injustice, from hunger – both physical and spiritual. It's change for the sake of the gullible and foolish who lack godly wisdom and lash out in their ignorance. It's change for the sake of the hateful and resentful imprisoned by their demons.

Allowing God to work through us to give mercy and forgiveness and transformation is why we were created. It's why we're alive, to gain our souls, and help others gain theirs. That's a vision worth living and dying for. That's a vision worthy of putting up with some change. Amen.