

“We the Temple of God: Now and Always”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
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Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13:1-8

“Do you see these great buildings?” Jesus asked. “Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” Strong words, strange words that beg the question, “Why didn’t the disciples ask Jesus how?” I mean, they’d just been marveling at the Temple’s grandeur, and rightly so. It was one of the wonders of the ancient world. We’ve all seen the Wailing Wall on TV. Some of us have been there, and it’s really big, but that’s only a small section of the Temple’s retaining wall, the last remnant of a massive structure. How could it be torn down?

That retaining wall reached up to heights of 80 feet, and some parts of the Temple complex itself rose up to an amazing 175 feet above the foundation. From archaeological expeditions, rubble’s been found, showing that some stones weighed up to 80 tons. One stone was 40 feet long and weighed 300 tons. That’s 600,000 pounds.

But the Temple struck people with awe not only for its sheer size, but for its beauty. Again, thanks to archeology, and to non-biblical sources written at the time, we have a pretty good idea of what the Temple looked like. There were grand staircases, huge arches, and spacious courtyards. The Temple itself was adorned with the finest of everything, inside and out. It must have taken people’s breath away.

All of this took over 46 years to build, and during the time of Jesus, the Temple was over 500 years old. It served as the focal point of Jewish worship. People went on pilgrimage from across the known world to offer sacrifices on the holiest days of Judaism. We can only imagine the spiritual energy that pulsed through that place.

So when Jesus said, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down,” one might expect the disciples to have asked how, or who. Who could possibly dismantle the whole thing, and why? Why would God allow it? Why would a conqueror be so wasteful?

Yet instead of asking Jesus how or who or why, the disciples wanted to know when. They knew that this could happen, because it already had, way back in 597 B.C., when the Babylonians wiped out the Temple. The disciples wanted to know when so that they could get ready, prepare for a repeat of the worse cataclysm in the history of their nation. This showed their trust in Jesus. They didn’t doubt for an instant the truth of his claim. They just wanted to know when.

As was so often the case, Jesus didn’t give them a straight answer. He didn’t supply them with a date, but he did give them a rough description of the warning signs. Jesus urged them to be vigilant and discerning. Many would try to lead the faithful astray by making false claims. “I’m the guy you’ve been waiting for. The time is at hand. Come, follow me. It’s the only way you can be saved.” We know only too well how many have made such claims over the past 2,000 years, right up until the present day.

Then Jesus told them to keep their cool when “wars and rumors of wars” occurred. There would be earthquakes and famines, too, but this would be just “the beginning of the birth pangs.” It would get much, much worse before it got any better, and what we’ve heard today is just the start of Chapter 13, dubbed by scholars as “Mark’s Little Apocalypse.” Go home and read the whole thing. It’s dreadful.

Yet even after you’ve studied it closely, you will be no closer to knowing when than the disciples were, because everything Jesus describes has happened in every generation, and as

Jesus told them, near the very end of this chapter, “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” And I think holding this vital information back was intentional, but why?

Wouldn't the Father have wanted Jesus to know so that the faithful could prepare, evangelize with urgency, and bring as many people as possible to Jesus before it was too late? I believe God wants all of those things, but above all, He wants vigilance, intense commitment to the cause, unceasing prayer.

Jesus didn't know precisely when the end would come, but giving clues like war, earthquake, famine, widespread blasphemy, false prophets – things that happen in every generation – Jesus was warning that it could happen in any generation at any time, at an unexpected time. “Beware, keep alert,” Jesus urged, “for you do not know when the time will come,” and neither do we.

In the early Church, the destruction of the Temple was likely seen as a clear sign that the time was nigh. Surely, such an abomination, such awful sacrilege was the beginning of the end, but it wasn't. Here we stand, almost 2,000 years later, still waiting and wondering. You can take this one of two ways.

Surely, after all this time the odds are high that the day will come soon. Or we can figure that after 700,000 days, the likelihood is low that tomorrow will be the day of Christ's return. But what we do know, if we're honest, is that for almost all of us, the sense of urgency has faded, our level of alertness has become slight.

I mean, when the last time you've given it any thought? Setting aside the preparation for this sermon, the last time I've thought about it was three weeks ago, and that was only because we entered the apocalyptic section of the Book of Daniel at our Wednesday morning Bible study.

We just don't think about it. We don't want to, because scripture makes plain that it will be terrible. We've already got plenty to deal with in daily life. But even though it will get much worse before it gets any better, it will get better, and that's the promise we need to hold on to.

Even the destruction of the Temple, traumatic as it was, served God's purpose. The Temple was viewed as a special dwelling place for God. When you were there, you were closer to God than you ever could be anywhere else. But with the Temple gone, new ideas, new opportunities, and new realities about where God resides began to surface.

The Book of Hebrews sees it this way. Since Jesus sacrificed for our sins, the practice of sacrificing is no longer needed. He is the great high priest, sinless, whose singular sacrifice of self proves sufficient once and for all. We can't replicate or repeat it. The power of reconciliation and forgiveness now exists everywhere, at all times and places, fully accessible. This fulfills the prophecy of Jeremiah, who under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit foresaw God's intent. "I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds. I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more." [Jeremiah 31:33-34]

In other words, the saving grace of the law of love, embodied in Jesus, now resides within the hearts of the faithful who choose to accept it with thanksgiving. And together, we comprise the Church, the Body of Christ – God's new Temple. Now it's tempting to think, and many do, that with God in our hearts, the Church is no longer required. "I'm spiritual, but not religious," is a common phrase these days.

But the author of Hebrews would disagree. "Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching." We need each other. There's no such thing as an individual Christian.

But we need to be clear that the sacred space we're in is not the Church. We call it that, because this is where we gather to worship, but the English word Church comes from the Greek *ekklesia*, which literally means "gathering" or "assembly," not a building. We, along with billions of others around the world, are the Church, the gathering that praises God, offers both encouragement and accountability, and seeks inspiration and wisdom.

We as Church are called to be vigilant, merciful, welcoming. We as Church are commanded to love others, even when we don't like them – perhaps especially when we don't like them. We as Church, as the new Temple of God's presence, are an agent of forgiveness, reconciliation, and transformation through the power of Jesus working through us. And when it comes to the question of when, "When shall we unleash the power of God?" the answer is right now and always.

When are we to be broken, like the bread of Holy Communion, so that healing can be given to those who hurt? Now and always. For the Temple of God's grace shall not pass away until the Day has come. This building might be razed to the ground in the meantime, but the faithful will endure if we stay true to our God-given purpose as witnesses of Christ's resurrection grace. Amen.