

“Vegetarian Lions and a Pile of Bricks (what’s so hopeful about *that?!)*”

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November 17, 2019

Isaiah 65:17-65:

Luke 21:5-19

The pairing of these two texts we have today from the lectionary has the effect of a sweet and sour sauce. You hear the sour acidity of Jesus’ words predicting the end times: talk of wars and insurrection, earthquakes, famines and plagues. At the same time you receive the sweet, hopeful promise of God’s restoration, a place where the people will prosper in houses that they built, enjoying the fruits of their own vineyard, a time when all weeping will cease, and when no one will hurt or destroy on God’s holy mountain.

Today, if we were to hear someone make such bold proclamations, whether of the sweet flavor or the sour flavor, we would not know what to do with those words. People who talk like that “remain suspect, like the oddball cousin who always says strange things in strange ways”¹-- you know *that* family member, who will likely bombard you over Thanksgiving dinner with the latest conspiracy theory.

But these are exactly the kinds of words we need to hear today, in these times, to build not gleaming walls, but hope in the kinds of transformation that God can bring into our world today.

It is true, we have no gleaming Temple. The walls of the Jerusalem Temple remain destroyed, as they were in the year 70 CE-- 15 years before Luke’s gospel was written. You see, Luke’s angle on Jesus was not so much an apocalyptic prophesy, but an interpretation, or unveiling, of things that had already happened. That is actually what the word apocalypse means-- an unveiling.

Today, the only piece of the Temple that remains is the Western Wall-- the Wailing Wall, where Jews come to offer their prayers and push their written words between ancient, crumbling bricks. The spot is holy to Islam too, as Muslims believe their prophet Muhammed made his ascent to heaven from that very place. And Christians have tried

¹ Stephen C. Johnson, THE "FUTURE" OF PREACHING: APOCALYPTIC ESCHATOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN PROCLAMATION

to take control of the spot, certainly during the Crusades but also in more recent history, such as in 1917 when British troops marched into Jerusalem and took control of the religious monuments as they colonised Palestine, which was 90% Arab Muslims and Christians at that time. If you speak to people who have made a religious pilgrimage to the Holy Land, such as Jonathan and Virginia from our church recently did, you may hear of a profound religious experience. But you are just as likely to hear that the tensions between different political interests, the constant competition for tourist dollars from local merchants, and the swells of people got in the way of truly sensing the presence of the holy there. In other words, you can feel the dust and rubble of lost glory.

But we still build temples today, and they are huge, and they are gleaming, and you don't even have to go to Jerusalem to see it-- in fact, you can stay in New Jersey. Today we call our temples things like "American Dream," which was just unveiled in the past month, though we have been watching its many phases of construction, bankruptcy, and changes of ownership since 2003. The idea of the American Dream-- that anyone can become somebody, regardless of class; the idea that if, granted the freedom to do so, we will lean in towards life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, the idea that equality-- well, that can now be found-- I mean, bought and sold-- in this structure that is a mixture of glass and warehouse walls on I-95. Inside, you can pursue the dream by shopping the best of luxury retail, while your children pursue happiness in any or all of the 3 theme parks within, where you can ride waterslides, roller coasters, and learn to ski.

"See these beautiful stones that make up the Temple? See what adornment? See how much we love God?" the people asked Jesus back in Jerusalem. When they start to mistake buildings for glory, God's people are in trouble. And so, Jesus predicts what will happen, and his predictions have a ring of truth today. I saw a meme recently of a bookstore which had changed its section on "Apocalyptic Literature" to "Current Events."

Last week we saw another mass shooting, and we have reached a generation of kids who grow up expecting this sort of thing will happen. I'm not sure which is more apocalyptic-- the experience of a school shooting, or the fact that we no longer find them all too surprising.

The pillars of our democracy are being called into question. No matter how you feel about the president of this country, the fact that he is under an impeachment inquiry leaves you unsettled about the well-being of American democracy. The role of

countries such as Ukraine and Russia remind us that we as a country do not operate in our own bubble; we belong to a vast and complicated network of global alliance and global opposition, and it is not always clear what is what.

We have a crumbling infrastructure-- whether it is the pipes that deliver water to our homes, or tunnels that deliver cars and trains into Manhattan, we know that without both maintenance and innovation, no stone will be left on stone; all will be thrown down.

But believe it or not, Jesus' words have hope for us as much as the prophet's promise of restoration. Rubble and dust is something God can actually work with. Remember, after all, it was from mere dust that God fashioned into a body, and then (phhhhaah) breathed air, life, spirit into that dust, and we had human life.

You see, the people had forgotten that the faith of early Israel began not as a people rooted in a Temple, but as a nomadic people, wandering from place to place in search of food and water and a safe place to tend their animals. Like the people, God did not have a home, but instead journeyed with them.

It was while they lived as nomadic, wandering people that God made to them God's best promises: I will make of you a great nation; your descendents will be like the stars; I will free my people from the house of bondage; you will come to a land where milk and honey flow... These are all promises that God made to the people, and which the people trusted would come true even though their evidence seemed far away. God's people are ones who are used to longing. And so, when those admiring the Temple were patting themselves on the back, congratulating themselves that they and their God have finally made it, as if they can just sit back and enjoy the ride? Nooo!

Sometimes we get to know some nomadic wanderers today. They are the homeless of our community, wandering in search of a safe place to eat and sleep. A couple times a year, our congregation helps to host homeless families staying in our community through the Family Promise shelter. In a way, these guests of the shelter are like the early Hebrews, in that they don't get to stay in any one place, even a shelter. Instead, Family Promise migrates from congregation to congregation every week or so, throughout Bergen County, and they have to have faith in a hope that is not yet seen.

Last time I visited there when our church was hosting, I ended up chatting with a mom. I noticed she had a teenage son, who was on the cusp of becoming a man. He was a senior in high school. I feel a particular compassion for a mother experiencing homelessness with her teenage child, because there were two times during my teenage

years when my mother and I were evicted from our apartment and lost our home; the first time it happened, everything we owned was thrown into the street. Although I was able to move in with my dad, and my mom with her sister, I can still feel in the pit of my stomach the unsettling chaos of what it is like to lose your home. Someone from our group asked if he was planning on going to college. The mom's face brightened up as she shared what her hopes were for him. Turns out she had done her research on a program she thinks would be good for him. But then her face dimmed. She told us that so far, she hasn't been able to get her son to show any interest in going to college. "Maybe college just isn't for him," one of our members said, and made some suggestions of other vocations that don't require college but could still earn a decent wage.

But I could not help but notice the way his mom's face had lit up when she talked about college. It was true that maybe now was not the time for college for her son, but... "How about you?" I asked the mom. "Have you been to college?" Well, no... she stammered. I wanted to, I did, but once I had a kid it was just one thing after another, and I guess all these years I have just been trying to survive. "I wonder if it could happen now..." I hope it was not rubbing salt into wounds to suggest college to a woman living in a homeless shelter with her son. But something in our conversation showed me that she recognized the power of an education and, if she took the opportunity, she would use it well, in ways that would not only make her life better, but would set her son up for success, too, and maybe even inspire him to go back to school as well. BB King once said, "Education is the one thing that cannot be taken from you." Your spouse may leave; you may lose your job or even lose your home, but learning gets to travel with you everywhere you go. I would add that God also follows you wherever you go, whether you have a steady home, a gleaming Temple, or just the skin on your back.

Having spent several years on the brink of homelessness myself, I know that if it had not been for some mentors encouraging me to dream dreams for my life, I may have stayed in the pit of despair. Through the prophets, God calls us to have big dreams for ourselves, even impossible ones. Isaiah's prediction of a lion eating straw with the lamb is absurd. Everyone knows the lion would rather eat the lamb than eat the lamb's vegetarian diet. But the prophetic imagination challenges us to stretch our notion of possibility, as a warmup for enacting what God has in store for us. If we can't imagine lions and lambs living peace, how can we find the humanity with our enemies in ways that open the doors to peacemaking? If we cannot just imagine someone planting saplings and living in a home long enough to see them become trees that bear fruit, then how can we have the vision to come up with a plan that could provide desperately

needed affordable housing in our community? How can we imagine sharing enough of our resources so that children do not go hungry, and the elderly do not spend their last years in loneliness?

Our church building has a sign that is the envy of congregations all around. We have a new kitchen and bathrooms that are still gleaming. But the real riches of our church is in our ability to sit together and imagine the world as God would have it. You are each holy daydreamers, and because we as a community do not scoff at the idea of vegetarian lions, we have a special gift of being able to look out from God's holy mountain and see what is possible-- even from the rubble, even from the dust. And then, having seen, we can act as those whom God calls a joy, a people who are God's delight. Let it be so. Amen.