

“It’s All Coming Down”

Liturgical Date: Proper 28 C

Primary Text: St. Luke 21:5-36

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the 23rd Sunday after Pentecost, is the Gospel Lesson appointed from St. Luke Chapter 21. We see here that Jesus speaks of things to come. Some of the things that Jesus speaks of relate to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and others concern His Second Coming on the Last Day-as the return of Jesus is a key theme that we hear about during the last few weeks of the lectionary each year. This is a lengthy reading and so much can be said about it. The focus for us today will be on the contrast between what is temporary and what is eternal. Even the greatest structures built by man will not endure forever, thus the title of today’s sermon is “It’s All Coming Down”.

For two years of my childhood, when I was 6-8 years old to be exact, my family lived in northern New Jersey. There were definitely some negatives (we only stayed two years) as well as positives about living there. One of the best things would be that we were a relatively short train ride from one of the most interesting cities in the world, New York City. We had the opportunity to visit a few times in our short sojourn in “Jersey.” I was pretty young, but I do remember being overwhelmed by the sheer size of the place-especially being a small boy. I particularly remember one trip into the city with my dad. We went to the address of 185 Fulton Street. We then entered a building, and after waiting in line, entered an elevator that seemed to go up forever-actually it was 107 stories. After getting out of the elevator we were in an observation deck that at 1,310 feet was higher than even the

other skyscrapers. The view went on for miles and miles and was breathtaking and I felt so small on top of this huge building. Of course, this trip in the early 1980s was to the World Trade Center. It was something I would never forget. The building seemed so impressive, so big, so permanent. A monument to what man could achieve.

But it wasn't permanent. I, like many of you, watched in disbelief and horror and sadness as on the morning of September 11, 2001 Islamic terrorists would fly two hijacked commercial airliners into the twin towers of the World Trade Center. They would quickly collapse into piles of rubble, taking thousands of lives with them. This same building that I visited and stood atop of as a child thinking that I had never seen anything so big, impressive, and sturdy had come down. How could this be? This was a symbol of America's greatness. What would become of us? Could we overcome this?

No doubt, these are some of the same questions that were rumbling around in Jesus' Disciples' minds in the early 30s AD. It is Tuesday of Holy Week and the Disciples were admiring the most impressive-and important-building of their nation, the temple. They remarked how beautiful it was. But Jesus' response, without any warning, would shake them. Jesus, says in verse 6, *"As for these things which ye behold, the days will come, in which there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down."* What? How could such a place be destroyed so completely?

The temple had been undergoing major renovations in an attempt to restore it to its previous glory. Herod the Great had begun this project around 20 BC and 50 years later much had been completed, but work was still going on that would continue until 64 AD. The time, scope, and cost of the project was impressive. 40 foot columns hand-carved from unbroken

and glistening white marble stretched to the heavens. The best materials were used. Lavish works of art were brought in. Herod had even gifted an artist-crafted cluster of grapes as tall as a man and made of pure gold! This structure was big, imposing, and meant to be permanent.

And it wasn't just that the size and architecture were impressive. It was also the most important building in the world to the Jews because it was the seat of the temple system that included animal sacrifices. The temple was believed to be the one spot where heaven touched earth. This was the very place where the one true God dwelled in which YHWH's presence was in the holy of holies. That such an impressive and holy place would be completely destroyed was indeed a shocking and unbelievable thing for Jesus to say. Keep in mind that of those that believed that Jesus was or could be the Messiah, many of them saw the Messiah as a political savior. The Messiah would overthrow the hated Romans and the Jewish people would be free from their colonial occupiers. This is what many who waved palm branches and shouted "Hosanna" hoped for just two days earlier. But Jesus is shattering those dreams with what He says here. Not only would He not be the earthly king they desired, Jesus is saying it is going to get worse. The temple, and later He makes it clear that all of Jerusalem, would be destroyed. It was all coming down.

Jesus provides an extensive prophetic teaching here, as He does in the parallel accounts in St. Matthew 24 and St. Mark 13. It is very important to note that this text is prime example of the "now and not yet" aspect of Biblical prophecy. When the prophets speak of future events, we are not to understand that all of the things they speak of will happen at the same time. In Luke 21 some of the things that Jesus speaks of are events that will happen prior to the destruction of the temple and some of the events will

happen prior to His return. A failure to understand this has led to erroneous interpretations of what Jesus was teaching. This sermon is not about going through each verse and parsing each of the prophecies that Jesus spoke, but in general the things that He speaks in the first part of the passage are primarily pointing to the destruction of the temple and those in the second part precede His return on the Last Day.

In the decades following Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension the Jews would revolt against the Romans. In 70 AD Jerusalem and its temple would be destroyed-just as Jesus said it would. The Roman historian Flavius Josephus records what happened as even non-Christian history confirms it. The Bible's descriptions are so vivid and accurate that this is one of the reasons that those who doubt the supernatural nature of the Bible want to place the writing of Luke later. But of course, Jesus got it just right. He predicted the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and that is just what happened. Early Christians certainly took their Lord's words seriously. In verses 20-21 Jesus said when you see Jerusalem surrounded you don't want to take refuge in the city, but flee it. The ancient historian Eusebius records that this is what Christians in fact did.

The destruction of the temple teaches us several important lessons. As just noted, it is a proof of the accuracy of the Bible and the divine revelation of Jesus because He predicts the future and what He says comes to pass. We also should take to heart that we don't want to be so impressed with the world's splendor that we lose sight of the eternal. Sure we can look at and admire amazing structures of the world. But Jesus, as the Creator through whom all things were made could look at it and say, "I've made better." And every one of the impressive structures of the world are all coming down. The physical that we currently see will not endure, but the

spiritual will. But the Jewish temple was not only an impressive marvel of engineering and construction. It was a holy place, a place of the very presence of God. Why would God allow it to be destroyed?

The Gospel of Luke has several key events centered around the temple. But the point is that Jesus, the very incarnation of God who is on earth, is the greater temple. Just three days after what Jesus speaks in our Gospel Lesson, He will become the one-time perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world on the cross. He will rise from the dead in victory over death and sin, showing that the Father accepted this sacrifice. So the temple is rendered obsolete. Its sacrifices are no longer needed as they all pointed to what Jesus would do and He did it. God's presence would no longer touch earth in just one spot. The curtain was torn in two. Jesus is the greater temple and by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, He-and thus God, is present wherever His people are. While many hearing Jesus' words are distressed that their beloved temple would fall, Jesus is in effect saying, *"If you are pinning your hopes of salvation on this piece of rock, forget it!"* Just this past April people around the world watched in shock and sadness as the great Cathedral of Notre Dame burned. It especially hit the people of Paris and France as this beloved symbol of their nation and faith suffered great damage. While fires and conquering armies can destroy structures, they cannot destroy the Church. Jesus is the rock and our faith is based on Him and the confession that He is Lord-not on buildings.

As the point has been made already, most of the prophetic things that Jesus has spoken up through verse 24 refer directly to the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem, but they also point as a foreshadowing to a shaking and destruction that will be on a much larger and complete scale. Our Master speaks from verse 25 forward primarily of events connected to His

Second Coming on the Last Day. Luther in preaching on these verses said, *“This Gospel has two parts. The first is about the signs which occur before Judgment Day. The second is an exhortation encouraging us not to be afraid at what is going to happen.”*

On Wednesday evenings we have been studying Revelation. It is rich in symbolism that points to many of the persecutions that the Church was enduring under the Romans in the AD 90s. And it also points us to things that will happen prior to and at the return of Jesus Christ. Some of the images can be frightening.

But through it all, God is there. He will return, and it will be a return in victory. We need not fear. We should be encouraged. It has been said that there are three types of people in the world: those that are fearful, those that don't know enough to be fearful, and those that know their Bibles. As Christians we should fall into that third category. We should as verse 28 says and a great Advent hymn echoes, *“Lift up your heads, for your redemption draweth nigh.”*

Verse 36 says something we also see in a few other places of the Gospels, *“Watch ye therefore, and pray always.”* Watch and pray. The 19th Century evangelist D.L. Moody stated, *“He who kneels the most, stands best.”* Prayer is a powerful weapon. It is a comforting action. In trusting in the eternal promises of God rather than the shiny objects of the world or being caught up in the cares of this life, we keep our focus through trials and tribulations right where it needs to be: on Jesus.

It's all coming down. Every bit of it. No matter how sturdy, impressive, or permanent something looks it will not endure forever. This is what I was reminded of on 9/11 as I reflected back on my childhood. To Jesus' shocked hearers on that day they were told that the temple and holy

city would be destroyed by Gentiles. But the true and greater temple would endure. Furthermore, the whole sinful and fallen world would pass away. A difficult time of natural disasters, wars, famines, family division, and persecutions will precede it. But the Son of man will come in a cloud with power and great glory (v 27).

And there is something that will endure. Something that is eternal and indestructible. Read verse 33, *“Heaven and earth shall pass away; but my words will not pass away.”* The Reformation had 1 Peter 1:24-25, which echoes Isaiah 40:6, as its foundational-its “theme verse” if you will. It is same verse which is used by our own Concordia Publishing House which celebrates its 150th year in this very year. *“For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withereth, and flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth forever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.”* As sure as the destruction that Jesus prophesied about the temple would happen, the current earth and heaven will pass away. It will all come down. But take heart that the Word of God will endure forever. This eternal word will create the wonderful and blessed new heavens and earth that all believers will enjoy with God and His people, without end. God Himself, the Alpha and Omega, is the One that never ends in His provision and mercy. One thing will stand: the very Word of God. And that is all we need.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.