

Year C Proper 28  
Isaiah 65:17-25  
Canticle 9  
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13  
Luke 21:5-19

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

This morning's gospel sounds a bit apocalyptic: wars, insurrections, earthquakes, famines, plagues. Certainly these things are predicted for the end times. But in this passage of Luke's gospel, Jesus is in Jerusalem, in the temple, and he's talking about the destruction of the temple, not about the world generally. And he's also talking about suffering in spiritual life.

The temple in Jerusalem, as many of you know, was the center and the focus of Jewish spiritual life. It was literally the house of the Lord, and God was sometimes spoken of as being present in the holy of holies, on the Ark of the Covenant "seated between the cherubim." King David was the first one to move the Ark of the Covenant to the top of Mount Moriah, which was thought to be the mountain where Abraham brought Isaac to be sacrificed. However, construction of the first temple on that mountain took place under David's son Solomon, and was finished in 957 B.C. This first temple was fairly simple, containing only a vestibule, a large room for worship services, and the Holy of Holies, where the ark of the Covenant was kept. Over time, the temple was seen as the only place for sacrifice to God, on the mountain renamed Temple Mount, and it became the center of religious and cultural identity for the Jewish people.

For that reason, when the Babylonians conquered, enslaved and transported the Jews in 586 B.C., they also destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. Then, when the Jews were allowed to return almost 50 years later, they built the Second Temple, which took twenty-three years to build. This Second Temple survived various uprisings, desecrations and plunderings, and was ripe for renovation several hundred years later by the time Herod the Great begins expanding it in 22 B.C. The New Testament doesn't really go into this fact, but Herod was a great builder. Yes, he was an evil and cruel despot, but he wanted the Jerusalem temple to be his masterpiece—so Herod expanded and ornamented the temple for 46 years.

He created a massive, 36 acre courtyard (that's like 27 football fields), surrounded by a fortress-like white wall. On top of the wall was a roofed colonnade that made an area for merchants and money changers to do business. In the middle of this huge courtyard was the temple proper, which was divided into terraced courts (courtyards). The first was the court of the gentiles, then three feet above that the sacred enclosure, then three feet above that the court of women, then ten feet above that was the court of Israel (for men); three feet above that was the court of the priests; eight feet above that was the House of God, which was the place where sacrifices were made, and the Holy of Holies, where God lived, seated between the cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant. This massive temple was ornamented with gold, with marble, with jewels and everything that Herod could do to make it awe-inspiring.

And it worked. When Jesus and the disciples go to the temple, the disciples are awe-struck, remarking on the lavishness of the space. It was decorated with "beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God." But Jesus is unimpressed, knowing that it will be destroyed again. "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." Luke, the writer of this gospel, is probably writing around the year 80, so to his audience, Jesus is already talking about history—he was a very reliable prophet in this. Luke's audience would know that the Romans destroyed Herod's magnificent temple in the year 70, in response to Jewish insurrection.

So what Jesus is describing is exactly what happened. People rose up to lead the Jews to independence, saying "I am he!...The time is near!" Follow me! But of course, those men

were not the savior. Then there were nations rising against nation, “great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues...and dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.” And the temple was destroyed.

But something other than the destruction of the temple is going on here. Jesus says that all of this upheaval and destruction will be preceded by persecution of his followers—the oppression of the people who are gathered around him in that richly ornamented space. *They* will be persecuted, tormented, arrested and put on trial. Interestingly, Jesus says that this “will give you an opportunity to testify.” An opportunity to testify. Somehow that isn’t very comforting in the face of arrest and torture. We can usually testify to God’s goodness when wonderful things have happened, but what do we do with the idea that *suffering* gives us an opportunity for testimony?

There is this idea that suffering refines a person’s character, like a metal is refined by heat. That through suffering a person can grow spiritually. Some would say that only through suffering can we grow spiritually. In *The Book of Joy*, which we finished discussing recently in Adult Forum, Archbishop Desmond Tutu talks about Nelson Mandela, and his 27 year imprisonment during apartheid. Tutu says that Mandela went into jail a terrorist, but then he emerged a man of deep spirituality and peace. Tutu said Mandela’s suffering at the hands of his jailers eventually enabled him to feel compassion for *them*. Mandela lived what Jesus says, “by your endurance you will gain your souls.”

Most people of great spirituality will tell you that suffering has been a part of their life. Perhaps they have experienced persecution, or illness, or starvation, or trauma. It could have been war, or mental or physical abuse, depression, or pain. The common thread here is that they grew emotionally and spiritually as a result of turning to God in their suffering. Jesus, who knows first-hand about persecution, suffering, and pain, was always present in *their* pain, and helped them to endure it.

This is hard. No one says it is easy, but Jesus tells his disciples, and us, that something good can come of suffering. **Not** that God makes us suffer in order to test us! No—but that God can bring something good out of even our suffering. We will then be able to testify to God’s goodness, even in the midst of our struggles. “And by your endurance you will gain your souls.” Amen.

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