
Not a One-Trick Pony

Isaiah 65:17-25 and Luke 21:5-19

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 17, 2013 by the Rev. Dr. Lester Ruth

Would.....you....look....at....that?

No, wait, look at that. That's even better.

Stop, stop, look at all the stones. I wonder how many it took to build this place.

I wonder how much all of this cost. I bet it was a pretty denarius.

And so the conversation went 2000 years ago with those gathered around Jesus at the very end of his ministry. Jesus had spent his last week teaching daily in the temple, that magnificent building that rose from the pinnacle of Jerusalem. The Lord had come suddenly to his temple but it seemed to have escaped the notice of most. Instead they were mesmerized by the beauty of the building, by its size, by its scope, by its lavishness, by its opulence, by its....(I need a thesaurus right now). It simply was the most astounding, largest building any Jewish worshiper ever saw.

And so I imagine some of those gathered around Jesus in the temple, pulling out their smart phones, taking pictures, updating their Facebook pages, tweeting, and texting simply O....M....G. Oh, my God. Or whatever the equivalent in 1st century Aramaic or Hebrew would have been. Of course, the one who was both man and God was standing right there next to them. But it is easy to get carried away by a beautiful building and overlook a visitation from God.

OK, I'm making up that part about smart phones and texting. We all know that those technologies did not exist back then. But that entourage around Jesus was smack in the middle of the most spectacular architecture that had ever existed in Judaism, and their jaws were hitting the floor.

That's why what Jesus said next must have hit them like a slap in the face: "As for these things you see," Jesus said, "the days will come when not one stone will be left on top of another. All will be thrown down." Not one stone on top of another. Talk about pulling the plug on a Facebook posting.

That Jesus was talking about the dismantling of the Temple must have been particularly shocking. This wasn't just any worship space, this was *the* worship space, and represented the restoration of Jerusalem as an urban phoenix rising from the ashes of destruction. There was a divine promise to restore Jerusalem, to create it as a joy, a place where the sound of weeping or the cry of distress would not be heard. You heard the promise in the Isaiah text that was just read. The Lord had promised to restore Jerusalem and here was Jesus saying the stones were going to tumble down again. What Jesus said was not only shocking, it was bitter.

For the streets of Jerusalem had already once echoed with weeping, been flooded with cries. There had already been a prior dismantling of the Temple and of the whole city at the start of the exile in Babylon several hundred years prior. Nebuzaradan,--doesn't that sound like a figure out of the movie Ghostbusters?--a servant of the king of Babylon had been the destructor on that day: he burned the house of the Lord (the Temple), he burned the king's house, and he burned every other great house in Jerusalem that had been on the walking tour brochure issued by the local tourist information center. The walls around the city had been broken down and everything of value in the temple had been carted off. The city was as barren as a tree plucked clean after a tornado.

Do you ever get fully over great tragedy?

What was particularly galling in the case of Jerusalem's first destruction was how others delighted in their misery. It's one thing to suffer, but it's another to have to endure someone else enjoying it. Do you remember that Psalm from a few weeks ago, Psalm 137: By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion...--most of us can recall the beginning of the Psalm but notice the anger of hurt with which it ends—remember, o Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!" I get this image of the neighboring Edomites, sitting there on a hill overlooking the city, drinking their brews, and egging on the Babylonians: Tear, it, down. Tear, it, down.

It's one thing to suffer; it's another to have someone enjoy your misery. Have you ever seen the Jodie Foster movie "The Accused"? She plays a woman gang raped in a bar. That's horrific enough. But the evil icing on the cake is the group of onlookers who encourage and call out for others to join the violence. It's one thing to be violated; to be destroyed; it's another to have had your devastation turned into an evening's entertainment.

And that's the way Jerusalem had felt. Even after they had returned from Exile the people still felt like a dog with its tail tucked between its legs. Would Jerusalem ever regain any of its former glory?

Yes, it would, was God's reply, and oh, what glory it would be. That's what we heard from Isaiah today: God's comforting word to the comfortless.

Has there been weeping and crying in Jerusalem? The Lord says, "No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress."

Have there been infants who died too early? Sick, starved, or murdered? The Lord says, "No more shall there be in Jerusalem an infant that lives but a few days."

Have there been adults who didn't get a fair shot at a lengthy life? The Lord says, "The one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth."

Have you had petitions and prayers, anguish poured out before the Lord, that seemed unheard? The Lord says, "Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear."

Wonderful promises. Soothing balm to the open wounds of the memories of a great tragedy.

But the Lord doesn't stop there. Some of the promises seem over the top: I am about to create a new heavens and a new earth, says the Lord. Even something of the peaceable kingdom of the original creation would be restored: The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox. Maybe even cats and dogs would get along.

Why such over the top promises? A few months ago it dawned on me that sometimes over the top promises are needed when there's a severe pain of loss. If you feel so bad that you're lower than low, that you feel like you have to look up to see hell, then something over the top sure can sound good.

Allow me a personal moment, please. The appeal of God's over the top promises came to me a few months ago when I lost to death the best dog I had ever had, Maddie, a Lab. I apologize for seemingly take a step back and, in the midst of a world with heart wrenching calamities, I know I'm talking about the loss of a personal pet, but bear with me for a moment. Although I had been looking at this passage nearly every day, these over the top promises didn't have much appeal to me. I read them and they ran off of me just like the rain does off of a Labrador Retriever's double coat. And then I lost Maddie, when her rear hips could no longer hold her up or let her walk.

Raw grief sunk me low. I posted my loss on Facebook. And friends started pointing me to a piece called the Rainbow Bridge about a complete physical restoration of our departed pets and our reunion with them. I know it is somewhat sappy perhaps but I was comforted by such an over the top promise.

If the Rainbow Bridge is a good word, how much better is the word from the One who sent his own Son, Jesus Christ, to die and even descend into our hell. If the Rainbow Bridge is a comforting word, how much better is the word from the One who raised his Son as the firstborn from the dead: I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. Such an over the top promise sunk in as I hoped that Maddie had simply transitioned from hearing my voice telling her she was a good dog to hearing her Creator calling her forth as he called forth new heavens and new earth.

If you came this morning, filled with hurt and grief, your words written with tears, hardly able to sputter out "Oh, my God...", then know that your God has a word to speak to you about a time and place when he will wipe every tear from our eyes; death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more. As he promises, "OMP, O my people, I am making all things new."

The people around Jesus that day would have known such promises for Jerusalem.

And thus Jesus' words in the Temple would have come as a shock to the system: take a look around, Jesus was telling them, you're impressed by this architecture? One day it is all coming down. Every last stone

from there to here. If God can speak a comforting word to the comfortless, then it appears he can also speak an uncomforting word to the too comfortable.

Do you know what Jesus was doing? He was not just talking about the dismantling of a building. He was talking about the dismantling of the power and prestige and livelihood of the powerful associated with the Temple, the chief priests, scribes, elders, and Sadducees. Jesus had spent the last week of his life teaching in the temple, but not just teaching. Day by day all those leaders had challenged him, tried to embarrass him, attempted to undercut his authority with the people, but at the end of day it wasn't Jesus who was washing egg off of his face. It was the entrenched leadership. Day by day Jesus showed just how vacuous they were, no better than white washed tombs. Looks good on the outside but really creepy on the inside.

Imagine that: shepherds more interested in themselves than in the good of the sheep. Imagine that: a nation's leaders more interested in themselves and their ideology than in the welfare of the people. Thank goodness that doesn't happen anymore. I said, thank goodness that doesn't happen anymore.

Well, anyway, Jesus' rhetoric over that last week had pretty well exposed how rot had already eaten away the national leaders. This statement about the temple (it's coming down!) was just icing on the cake. The leaders would have heard it as a personal threat. It stuck in their craw and made them angry.

And their anger distorted their hearing. It's funny how when you get angry something happens to your ears. They stop catching the little words and only catch the main nouns and verbs, tossing them together into a poisonous salad. No matter what he actually said (the temple will be destroyed), this is what they heard: I will destroy the temple. No matter what he actually said (the temple will be destroyed), this is what they heard: I will destroy you and your religion.

Imagine that: national leaders letting a sense of sense of self-protection, with a good dose of anger, distort their hearing. Thank goodness that never happens anymore: national leaders letting anger get in the way of actually hearing someone.

You know, God would be much simpler to deal with if God only had one kind of message, could say one kind of thing, if every word that proceeded from the mouth of God had that warm comfort of blessed assurance. But every divine word is not a gentle pat on the back.

Sure, when this God speaks through Jesus, he says things like "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." Very nice. I like those. But Jesus also says, "Blessed are you when people hate, exclude, revile, and defame you on account of me." So much for becoming a Christian to win popularity contests. Consider the Luke passage read earlier: a disciple's main troubles may come from our closest family members. And this Jesus also says, "woe to you if you are already rich, you have already received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep." Uncomforting words to the too comfortable. Could we just edit those out of the soundtrack and leave them scattered on the floor?

No, we can't if we want to be true to what was revealed in Jesus. Since a simple young woman, Mary, carrying no marks of prestige or wealth on her person but carrying the Word in her womb, it has been that way: God has filled the hungry with good things. God has lifted up the lowly. But this same God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones. He has sent the rich away empty.

God is not a one-trick pony. God's not like one of those fortune-telling machines where you put in your quarter and you get a pre-written, standard response. He's not like one of those politicians on TV: no matter what you ask them or what's happening, they fall back on predetermined talking points. But the God heard through Jesus Christ doesn't have talking points. He's got himself. And he has a passion for certain things, like justice.

People come to church—all churches, any church, perhaps even this church—for a variety of reasons. Most, I'd venture to say, are here because of deep needs and commitments to follow Christ and a desire to encounter God. But there are other reasons why some set their alarm clocks for this morning. If you came this morning only to be comfortable, if you came this morning simply for show, because it helps you make business

contacts, or because you simply only wanted to hear nice things, or because you merely—and only—enjoy the grandeur and beauty, but you didn't come expecting to be addressed by the living God of righteousness, be careful. Beautiful is the worship building but more beautiful is the One who is to be heard. Awesome is the worship building but more awesome is the One who is to be heard. Loved is the worship building but more loved should be the One who is to be heard and obeyed and worshiped. This is a good reminder for all churchgoers whether here or in the simplest of wood-framed buildings

It is tempting in places like this to pull out our phones and begin texting, OMG, O my God. But there's a more important text being sent this morning. It reads: OMP, O my people. And it is a divine text with a double-edge: one to cut the shackles that oppress the comfortless and one to undercut the self-satisfaction of the too comfortable. Let those who have ears to hear, hear.