

**Sermon – November 13, 2022**

**“Endurance is a Good Word”**

**Luke 21:5-19**

**Prayer:** O Wise Spirit, empower us to live in light of the gospel, declaring its truth with our words, and embodying this truth through our actions. Amen.

I hate needles. That is a fact. When I was in grade school, I had to hide in a corner when nurses came to our classroom to administer vaccines to school children. But I was not spared. My teacher would come and call my name out loud and she knew where I was hiding. My teacher would comfort me by saying – you need this needle so you won't get sick. Think of the pain like a mosquito bite and it will be over soon. I would hold my teacher's hand while I sucked in my breath so I wouldn't feel the pain. Through the years, I overcame my fear of needles but it was a hurdle for sure. Needles certainly tested my endurance.

Have you had any experience where your endurance is tested? Perhaps running a marathon? Solving a difficult puzzle? Getting stuck in a 20-minute traffic jam? Completing a task that is forever stressing you? Undergoing medical treatments or going through grief? We had our endurance tested when the COVID pandemic affected us in so many ways. Is endurance a good word? I consulted the Merriam Webster dictionary and gave me a wonderful definition: *“Endurance is the ability to withstand hardship or adversity; especially the ability to sustain a prolonged stressful effort or activity.”* Endurance is a good word for those of us who do not easily give up even when the testing gets rough and plain painful. When paired with its cousin, perseverance, endurance becomes more positive. We need to persevere to make sure that we do not suffer forever. We need to do something about the hurt, the pain, the grieving.

In our gospel reading today, the Lukan Jesus taught his disciples a lesson on endurance, particularly about persisting in the faith. Not the rosy – comfortable - easy – I can do this- no problem– kind of faith, but faith in the midst of discomfort, difficulties, hardships, conflicts, yes- even persecutions and deaths. Jesus challenges his disciples not to quit or easily give up but to get ready - to endure.

The context of this passage starts with a visit to the temple in Jerusalem by Jesus and his disciples. According to the 1st century historian, Josephus, the Jerusalem temple of Jesus's day was an awe-inspiring wonder. Constructed by the orders of Herod the Great, the temple occupied a platform twice as large as the Roman Forum and four times as large as the Athenian Acropolis. Herod reportedly used so much gold to cover the outside walls that anyone who gazed at them in bright sunlight risked blinding themselves. The disciples, upon seeing the temple, were awestruck – they were dazzled by the beauty and the solid architecture of the building. The gleam of the dazzling appearance gets into the eyes of the disciples. They saw a magnificent building - a big and strong architectural wonder. They saw Jewish identity all wrapped up in that Temple. It stood for everything they had; everything they were. It was a magnificent holy place. For them, the temple was the biggest, boldest, and most unshakeable symbol of God's presence they're capable of imagining. For them, the temple holds religious memories - a potent symbol of spiritual glory, pride, and worthiness. In short, what takes the followers' breath away as they gaze at the temple is the religious certainty and permanence those glittering stones display to the world. They truly marveled at the sight!

Jesus and his followers look at the same temple but they do not see the same thing. Jesus surprised them with these words: "Don't be so sure of what you see. The temple is going to be a heap of rubble; not one stone will be left upon another." It's hard for us to understand how devastating that would have been for first century Jews. The anxious disciples want to know: "When will this happen? What are the signs? What should we do!?" And Jesus tells of the temple's demise, which actually happened in 70 CE. By the time Luke recorded this gospel around 85-95 CE which means that the temple's destruction had already happened. For Luke's readers what Jesus says in verse 6 was more a reflection on the temple's destruction than a prediction of it. The magnificent temple was destroyed and crushed to the ground. If the disciples saw an immovable, unchangeable, magnificent structure, Jesus sees ruins. Rubble. Destruction. Fragility. Loss. Jesus sees all that must break and shake and end before new life and transformation will emerge.

To their questions of "what are the signs", Jesus' response was shocking. Mostly, bad stuff is going to happen: wars, earthquakes, famines, plagues, betrayals, family conflicts. This passage

is often described as apocalyptic. Our cultural references for “apocalyptic” probably include the movie, *Apocalypse Now*, or the “Left Behind” fiction series, or the Book of Revelation. There is a theological word used by Biblical scholars that pertains to the apocalypse. That word is “eschatology” from two Greek words, *eschaton*, meaning "last", and *logos*, meaning study. Eschatology is the study of 'end things' or end times, whether it's the end of human life, the end of ages, the end of all creation, the end of the world or the nature of God's reign. But the fact is, “apocalypse” means something quite different. An apocalypse is an unveiling. A disclosure of something that is difficult to understand. An aha moment, if you wish. The theologian Debie Thomas says this, which I find helpful: “To experience an apocalypse is to experience fresh sights. Honest disclosure. Accurate revelation. It is to apprehend reality as we've never apprehended it before.”

Jesus offers his disciples an apocalyptic vision. He invites them to look beyond the grandeur of the temple, and recognize that God's spirit is not limited to the four walls of the temple. The temple is not the epicenter of God's presence; God is not bound by mortar and stone. God exceeds every edifice, every institution, every mission statement, every doctrine, every strategic plan, and every symbol we human beings create of God. Like the disciples, sometimes we are side tracked about what really matters. Sometimes we are easily dazzled or fascinated with what is strong and beautiful and solid, without even realizing that that will also come to an end. We know that life is full of endings.

They happen whenever autumn fades fast when November comes in with cold chilly weather that says winter is almost here. When the moving truck pulls up in front of your home and off you go to your new house. When the oncologist tells you that your cancer is incurable. When your spouse says he or she doesn't love you anymore. And then, there is the ultimate ending - the reality of death which is lodged in the back of our minds, sometimes magnified by a threatening brochure neatly tucked under the windshield wiper of your car that says: “The world is ending. Are you ready?” Transitions or changes overwhelm us.

But this I believe. When we encounter changes in life, how painful or hurtful they seem to be, Jesus' words assure us that we are not far from God in that experience. God, is in fact, very near. The temple's destruction and all the scary stuff would not mean the end of the world. It would not mean the end of God's grace. We know that the world is constantly evolving, moving, changing. And our faith tells us that God gives hope even in the midst of hopelessness and despair. So, Jesus' words urge us to endure. All of us go through destruction and tearing down, even death in many forms, but that is not the end. As our new creed declares, "We are not alone. God is with us."

What is the good news about this text for us today? The good news of this passage, for me, is not simply to bear the apocalypse, but to bear it well. To bear it with courage, calm, and faith, Jesus calls us to practice in our daily living. And I think that's where the word endurance comes in. In our troubling context, it's easy to despair. Or to grow numb. Or to let exhaustion win. But it's precisely now, now, when the world around us feels the most apocalyptic, that we have to respond with resilience, courage, and truthful, unflinching witness. It's precisely now, when systemic evil and brokenness threaten to bring us to ruin that we have to live the Gospel. Temples fall, idols are smashed, images, ideas and theologies disappoint. There are days when it feels like life is just too much to bear and we're tempted to just lean into that old-time religion and summon up God to solve all our woes.

"Do not fear," Jesus says, when the earth shakes, and nations make war, and imposters preach sweet-talking gospels of empty words. Don't give in to despair. Do not thrive on human fear. Be perceptive. Be creative. Incarnate love as the world evolves and changes. Love your neighbour. Offer care. Live one day at a time.

Endurance is a good word, but let us not remain passive. We will participate in the change. If there is an end each day, there is also new life each day. If there are things being thrown down, there are also things ready to be built up. Remember these words and take them to heart: "By your endurance you will gain your souls." Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sources: BCUC Lectionary Group

“By Your Endurance”, a sermon by Debie Thomas, Posted 10 November 2019.