

## Is Endurance A Good Word?

### Luke 21:5-19

Have you had any experience where your endurance is tested? Perhaps running a 100 km run? Solving a difficult Sudoku puzzle? What about getting stuck in a 20-minute traffic jam? Or completing a task that is forever stressing you? What about those who are ill and wanting to recover right away? For me, I had my endurance tested a few weeks ago when I had my gum surgery. When the first needle found my gums, I thought – OK- let me endure this one. This is needed to freeze my gums so I won't feel any pain. Then when I saw the next needle poking the left side of my palate, I almost screamed “stop” and cease the procedure to go on. But instead of making a fuss and showing how I hate needles, anyway, I am now a grown up and a minister for that matter, I didn't say anything instead I endured the searing pain and told myself that I needed this needle, though painful and hurting as it was, to keep my teeth and gums in a better shape. Is endurance a good word? The lectionary group says yes as long as it is paired with its cousin –perseverance. Endurance connotes a passive reaction while perseverance is active. I consulted Mr. Wikipedia and gave me a wonderful definition of both words: *Endurance is the measure of a person's stamina or persistence while perseverance is continuing in a course of action without regard to discouragement, opposition or previous failure.* Endurance is a good word for those of us who do not easily give up even when the testing gets rough and plain painful but we must not stay there forever. We need to persevere to make sure that we do something about the hurt, the pain, the grieving.

Our gospel reading today points us to Jesus who makes us see another side of persisting in the faith. Not the rosy – comfortable - easy – I can do this- no problem– kind of faith, but pictures of discomfort, difficulties, hardships, conflicts, yes- even persecutions and deaths. Jesus seem to tell his disciples: are you ready to endure hardships and struggles by following me? Are you still with me when you know that the outrageous outcome of discipleship, of what it is to stay in the faith entails persecution and even death? What might the gospel writer Luke mean when he portrays Jesus challenging his disciples in this text? The context of this passage starts with a visit to the temple in Jerusalem by Jesus and his disciples. According to the 1<sup>st</sup> 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 hold religious memory. They bolster a colonized people's identity. They offer the faithful 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 were 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 his 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. It would be like telling Canadians that the Parliament House would be crushed into pieces. The anxious disciples want to know: "When will this happen? What will be the signs? What should we do!" And Jesus prophesied of the temple's demise which actually happened in 70 CE. By the time Luke recorded his gospel around 95 CE, this had already happened. In 70 CE, the Roman government had enough of Jewish insurrections so Emperor Nero and General Titus and his army surrounded Jerusalem. Most of the people fled into Jerusalem, hoping and praying that the strong walls, and the presence of the temple, would ensure their safety. But they were wrong - thousands of men, women, and children - those who depended on the security of these stones that the disciples had marveled about were all killed. And 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, not permanence. Loss, not glory. Change, not status

quo. 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 says a lot in response. Mostly bad stuff is going to happen: wars, insurrections, earthquakes, famines, plagues, betrayals, family conflicts. This passage is often described as apocalyptic. If you’re like me, your cultural references for “apocalypse” 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 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 the age, the end of all creation, the end of the world or the nature of the 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. The theologian Debie Thomas says this which I find helpful: *“To experience an apocalypse is to experience fresh sight. Honest disclosure. Accurate revelation. It is to apprehend reality as we’ve never apprehended it before.”*

In this sense, what Jesus offers his disciples in this Gospel reading is an apocalyptic vision. He invites them to look beyond the grandeur of the temple, and recognize that God’s spirit will not suffer limitation in the four walls of the temple. The temple is not the epicenter of God’s work; 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 too will come to an end. We know that life is full of endings, big or small. A small ending happens whenever autumn fades fast when November comes in with cold chilly weather that says winter is here. A bigger ending when the moving truck pulls up in front of your home and off you go to new house. A still bigger ending when the oncologist tells you your cancer is incurable: all they can do is slow it down. Sometimes the transition hurts. Changes hurt. When you are encountering the anxiety of any change in your life, be assured that you are not far from God in that experience. You are, instead, very near. And then,

there is the ultimate ending, the fear 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: “Jesus is coming. Are you ready?” However, Jesus also knew that the temple's destruction and all those scary stuffs he mentioned would not mean the total end of the world; it would not mean the end of God’s grace. The world is always moving, acting, doing, creating. And our faith tells us that God gives hope to people even in the midst of hopelessness and despair. So Jesus urged his followers to endure suffering with hope and patience. His lesson was that all of us suffer, and all of us go through destruction and tearing down. All of us even go through deaths, but that is not the end.

What is the challenge of this text for us today? For me, the great challenge of this passage is not simply to bear the apocalypse, but to bear it *well*. To bear it with the courage, calm, and faith Jesus calls me to practice in this passage. And I think that’s where the word endurance comes in. The second part of the Gospel story portrays Jesus teaching his disciples what to do and how to live when the walls come tumbling down. Jesus insists on calm strength and truthful testimony in the face of the apocalyptic. In this 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 age-old brokenness threaten to bring us to ruin that we have to live the Gospel. Temples fall, idols are smashed, and images, ideas and theologies disappoint. There are days, when it feels like the questions and the mysteries are 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 be terrified,” Jesus says, when the earth shakes, and nations make war, and imposters preach alluring gospels of fear, resentment, and hatred. Don’t give in to despair. Don’t capitalize on chaos. Don’t neglect to bear witness. God is not where people often say God is. Do not thrive on human fear. So avoid hasty, judgments. Be perceptive. Be creative. Make peace, choose hope, cultivate patience, and incarnate love as the world reels and changes. Make things new. Tell the good news. Be a witness. Love your neighbour. Offer care. Live one day at a time. Expect things to be difficult. And then expect them to get harder. *Endure* even when

they do. Persevere. Know that God is always near, no matter what the world looks or feels like. Speak the truth, trusting that God's Spirit is alive and present in our acts of bearing witness. Be faithful until the end, because God is still — always and everywhere — a God of love.

Endurance is a good word but let us not remain passive. Let us persevere and actively do our part. Things will be thrown down. And sometimes we think we can see the signs of the end of times. But that will not be the end. God will be in the change. We will participate in the change. And all things will be made new. If there is ending 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 Jesus' words: "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.