



Sermon for Twenty Third Sunday after Pentecost. Nov. 13, 2022 – Endurance will save!

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene
The Reverend Glenda Empsall, Deacon

[Isaiah 65:17-25, Canticle 9, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13, Luke 21:5-19](#)

Lord, when we experience suffering that makes us afraid that the end of everything is near, please help us to persevere. Strengthen us with devoted hope and the certainty of your abiding love. Amen.

I needed context to better understand the connection between the Old Testament and the Gospel lessons today, and I'm excited to share with you what I learned.

Following the destruction of Solomon's Temple (the First Temple) by Nebuchadnezzar II¹, 25% of Jews living in Jerusalem were exiled to Babylon.² About 50 years later, the Persian king, Cyrus the Great, defeated Babylon. Cyrus was well-known for respecting the customs and religions of the lands he conquered. He encouraged the Jews exiled in Babylon to return to Jerusalem.³

Zerubbabel, a Babylonian Jew, led the first group of over 42 thousand Jewish⁴ exiles back to Jerusalem. Zerubbabel became governor of Judah under the Persians and, with his leadership, the foundations for the Second Temple⁵ were laid on the site where Solomon's Temple had been destroyed.

The exiles had been repatriated, but although they were physically home, they were traumatized by their experiences during exile in Babylon. Jerusalem did not feel the same. Jerusalem was not the same. Those who had remained in Jerusalem had also been living under an oppressive regime, but they could not understand the feelings of those returning from Babylon. There was conflict and schism between the remnants and the immigrants.

This beautiful passage from Isaiah is a proclamation from God to those downhearted and distressed people that 'It gets better.' God will "create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind." There will still be wolves and lions, and lambs and oxen, but they will live together in peace. In this new age, God, not a human king, will reign over Zion. God will comfort the faithful and answer prayers that have not yet been spoken. Under God's rule, life will be even better than it had been before the exile, for everyone.

In 19 BCE, King Herod the Great began renovating the Second Temple⁶. A larger area on the Temple Mount was leveled so that the building could have a broader

¹ 587 BCE. BCE = Before Common Era (which used to be BC, Before Christ).

² Read Psalm 137.

³ Ezra 1:2-4.

⁴ 538 BCE.

⁵ 520–515 BCE.

⁶ <https://bible-history.com/jewishtemple/rebuilding-the-temple#0>

base and taller walls. The gleaming white limestone façade would be seen from miles away. The builders further beautified the work of Zerubbabel with golden gates, precious gems and expensive tapestries.

In today's Gospel lesson from Luke, when Jesus was walking with his followers near the Temple, the reconstruction was already in its 46th year. The disciples admired the beautiful **ornamentation** of the Temple. In Mark's Gospel⁷, they speak of the **many buildings** of the Temple complex, and in Matthew's⁸ they note the **massive stones** comprising the Temple's foundation and walls. Some of the corner stones weighed over 50 tons and the stones for the walls weighed 2-5 tons each.

Jesus said, "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." Of course, the disciples wanted to know **when** the destruction of the Temple would be, perhaps so they could prepare themselves for the end, or maybe so they could get out of town and escape death. Like us, they wanted to control the outcome of a frightening event that could impact them. Jesus didn't answer their question. In Mark⁹ and Matthew¹⁰ Jesus tells the disciples that even **he** doesn't know when the end will come, "but only the father." We know that Herod's Temple was destroyed by the Romans only 7 years later, in retaliation for ongoing Jewish revolts¹¹.

Jesus then tells them many terrifying things about what will happen before the end times. He warns the disciples not to follow or listen to false prophets and not to be afraid. In our time, we know about "wars and insurrections," about "Nation rising against nation, and kingdom against kingdom." In our time, we know about "earthquakes... famines and plagues; and dreadful portents and signs from heaven."

Jesus never said following him would be easy. Being one of his followers can be dangerous, even sometimes fatal. Jesus told his followers to have courage and to speak honestly from their hearts. He reassured his followers that their adversaries would be confounded, unable to successfully challenge them. Jesus' final declaration is, for me, the clincher, "You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

Think about it. Everyone of us is alive today because our ancestors were survivors. They endured! Your parents, their parents and their parents, going back in time between 200,000 and 300,000 years ago. Their DNA is in the hairs of your head. They have not perished. You who, like Empsall and me, have no biological children, do not despair. Hear this from the letter our younger son sent from his base in Afghanistan for my dad's Celebration of Life.

"The law of conservation of energy is that energy cannot be created or destroyed, but it can be transferred or transformed from one form to another (including

⁷ 13:1.

⁸ 24:1-3

⁹ 13:32

¹⁰ 24:36

¹¹ <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/jewishtemple.htm> a gruesome first-hand account by Jewish historian Josephus Flavius.

transformation into or from mass, as matter). The total amount of energy in a closed system never changes.

What this law states is largely ignored when it comes to death. What happens after you die? Well, everything that made you a person, all your atoms and molecules spread out in the largest closed system that humanity knows; The Universe. As an architect, Granddaddy took a lot of energy and converted it into recognizable matter – buildings in downtown Tucson, his cabin, my brother's rocking horse, my wife's jewelry box.

His atoms and his molecules have been scattering themselves and covering themselves all over the place! Look at his golf clubs. There's a bunch of Granddad! That doorknob? Full of escaped Granddad atoms. Every hug, every handshake, every kiss, every laugh, was Granddad sending escaped atoms into the universe. And since I received my fair share of the afore mentioned, I am proud and delighted to say I have a plethora of Granddad residing inside me.

And what's really cool? Now he's free to spread all that was him; the kindness, the love, the true greatness; he gets to spread all the things that made that happen, his atoms, across the entire universe. Don't be sad that he inevitably followed a rule of physics! Rejoice in the scientific fact that not only us, but now the entire universe, the billions upon billions of galaxies, solar systems, stars, planets, asteroids and maybe even aliens get to experience Granddad. Isn't that something?!"

In your presence, Lord, may we find peace that runs stronger and deeper than fear, a holy comfort that rewrites all distress. May we be enfolded in your grace, borne by your love, and steadied by the knowledge of your constant presence, so that we may traverse these otherwise impassable days.¹²

Amen.

¹² McKelvey, Douglas Kaine. Ed. from Every Moment Holy, Vol. II, pgs. 332, 333. Rabbit Room Press, www.rabbitroom.com.