



Sermon for the 23rd Sunday after Pentecost
Nov. 16, 2025

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene
The Rev. Dr. David Gortner



Isaiah 65:17-25

Canticle 9

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19

Hold us fast through all times we face, O God of our salvation. Help us hold fast to the hope of your new creation and everlasting kingdom. Let your Word sink into us, fill our minds and hearts and imaginations, become entwined in our being – and let it guide and uplift us in any storms and chaos around us. Be with us, Holy Spirit. Amen.

Friends, here comes Thanksgiving! And here comes Advent and Christmas. Right around the corner!

As we round the corner and hurtle toward our festive holiday season, we also walk through the end of the year of weekly scripture readings – and we hear of endings and beginnings, of unravelings and new weavings, of destruction and new creation. We have come to the end of the Church year, and we hear of hints towards the world's ending and the culmination of history. Next week, we celebrate the feast of Christ the King, and the ultimate victory of God. But it is the victory of the God who in Christ Jesus gathers the lost and scattered, who saves, who shows mercy, who rescues from darkness, who reigns and opens paradise hanging from the tree. Stay tuned! Christ will come again.

But in the meantime...

In the meantime, the march of history continues to unfold. In and out of seasons of our lives and of the lives of cultures and nations, time marches onward, and we find ourselves facing periods of fresh creation and of devastating destruction.

“Not one stone shall be left upon another.”

See these beautiful buildings? See these monuments to our achievements? See our pedestals and statues and great halls and capitols and mansions and carved mountains? See what we have made? See what came before us and will last after us?

“Not one stone shall be left upon another.”

So we hear the words of Jesus back to his disciples who were busy admiring the great new temple and the buildings around it in Jerusalem.

I remember when our high school marching band from mid-state Indiana got the honor of marching in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and being the band that heralded Santa.

Quote – misquote – of me in the newspaper, “I don't know how all these buildings stay up in the air.”

Really? A journalist painting me as their idea of a farm-country bumpkin from that big middle of the country completely unknown to New Yorkers, where folks don't know anything of city ways. When I grew up near Philadelphia and New York! All these years later, do I still have feelings about this? Yes, yes I do.

Anyway, I share this silly story to caution against painting the disciples in the same way, as “simple country fisherfolk” who were blown away by the big city. Yes, Herod had built to impress. Yes, there was gold inlay – the Roman historian Josephus notes how the temple was adorned with golden bunches of grapes taller than a man. So, of course, they must have admired and been struck by what had been created as the house of God and of worship for the Jewish people. And, of course, the glitzy new Jerusalem built up with wealth of the puppet king Herod who bowed down to Rome was far fancier than the villages and towns of Galilee. But the disciples were not unsophisticated folks. They were a pretty diverse bunch, all skilled in their own fields and trades, all with different experiences of the complexity of life in Judea under Roman occupation and in connection and trade with other nations of the Empire all around them.

The disciples were admiring the beauty and grandeur of the temple. And surely it was beautiful.

“The days will come when not one stone will be left upon another.”

Jesus said these words, and when Luke’s Gospel was being distributed in the early church, it was after the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and the murder of Jewish resistance fighters at Masada. So, the hearers of these words of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel would hear them both as Jesus’ foretelling prophecy and as very recent history that was still raw in their memories.

So we hear the disciples pivot in their conversation as they hear Jesus’ words, and then ask in a desperation to know, “When will this be? And what will be the sign that it is coming?”

Ah. Give us the insight to know and predict when it’s all going to hit the fan, when everything is going to unravel, when destruction will come, when the End of the World will happen. Give us the inside scoop on the march of history into the future. Give us a date and time. Give us the secret signal. Then we’ll know what to do and how to escape.

It is so tempting when things in the world go topsy-turvy to wag our heads knowingly and say, “Ah, it’s the End Times, it’s the coming Apocalypse, it’s a sure thing that Christ’s great return is about to happen – tomorrow!”

Well. It may be tomorrow. And, it may not. It may be years. It may be more centuries and millenia. And, it may not.

Jesus responds to his disciples very clearly with a warning. Basically, he says, “Don’t go there.” Don’t try to play at being God and knowing God’s mind. “Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them.”

And yet, this happens again and again. Our American religious history is rich with these moments and people. Mary Baker Eddy who claimed to be a second incarnation of Christ, and the Christian Science movement. William Miller’s claim that Christ would return on October 22nd of 1844, and his followers living through what came to be called the Great Disappointment. There have been others. And there continues to be a tug toward urgent fixation on predicting and anticipating the End of History.

Yes, we believe that history will come to an end, in God’s time. And we have images in scripture that paint a picture of great upheaval that will herald the dawn of God’s new creation. We live in hope and trust that

“Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again.” We live in trust and hope. But we don’t obsess about trying to predict or claim to know the time.

The early Christians in the first century were quite sure that Christ would come again soon, within their lifetimes. And so, when some believers died, and then more died, the church community in Thessaloniki and that part of Greek Macedonia first began to doubt and then became overly fixated on waiting for Jesus’ sure-to-be-soon return. Some had even gone to the point of simply waiting for Jesus and not doing any work. This is not very far from some of today’s Christians who are convinced that the Lord is coming tomorrow and that any effort to make a difference in the world and in people’s lives is pointless.

The second letter to the Thessalonians was written either by Paul or a later follower of Paul, either in the early decades of the Church or in the early second century, both of which had times of turmoil and cruel persecution under different emperors. Either way, the letter is written to urge folks to keep faith in the return of Christ and to endure and remain steadfast in the face of cruelty and twisted evil in the world around them, trusting that Christ will address the forces of evil with righteous power. The way the letter describe evil power is similar to how Jesus describes times of great injustice:

“When the person who is lawless comes, it will happen through Satan’s effort, with all kinds of fake power, signs, and wonders. It will happen with every sort of wicked deception of those who are heading toward destruction because they have refused to love the truth that would allow them to be saved” (II Thes. 2:9-10).

This happens in age after age, time after time, as we foolish humans continue to follow false promises and pretense of power. There is, has been, and will be more than one antichrist. They will build their great monuments and ravage and destroy other monuments, as nations rises against nation and kingdom against kingdom. And at different times, religious people will be put in the cross-hairs as targets for blame. It’s happened with Christians, it’s happened with Jews, it’s happened with Muslims, it has happened with every faith – sometimes by one faith against another. We create apocalypse, we humans...and we create persecutions that we call “cleansings.”

But the end is not yet. And, not one stone will be left upon another. So... Endure. Do not grow weary in doing right. Keep building what truly endures. And look with defiant hope and trust to the promise that God is making all things new, that peace will come to all creation, that wolves and lambs will eat together and all will find harmony. It will come true. It is coming true.

So, friends, let us consider our lives now, together, as this community of St. Luke’s in Coeur d’Alene, in North Idaho in this decade of the twenty-first century.

We have done so much tremendous work on this beloved church building. I just listed a series of our amazing work here, for fellow leaders in our diocese who work with the Standing Committee. The Standing Committee has responsibility for the diocese in the bishop’s absence, and is responsible for the care and proper maintenance of the Church’s property across the diocese, including congregations. I am working with them to develop a way for congregations to report significant facility work to them. And I cited our work as an example. Think about it. Think about what we have done in the years since I joined you all.

- We had a building inspection 4 years ago that helped us identify work to be done, which we then did.
- We had the basement flooding incident in our parish hall that we addressed.
- Threats to churches in the area led to replacing our exterior doors with more secure doors.
- We identified some important structural work in the foundation and undercroft as we proceeded on the chancel remodeling – and we completed that structural work.
- We had the protective coverings of the stained glass windows replaced.
- We re-sided the parish hall.
- We replaced the steeple and gate crosses that had been damaged by woodpeckers.
- In the coming year, thanks to a major gift, there will be a fresh landscape reworking of the entrance area and columbarium area which will also include replacement of the entry stairs that have significantly degraded. And we hope for grant support to help us with fresh restoration of the church's siding.

The amount of time, effort, talent, and financial treasure that has gone into these efforts is tremendous, and will have surpassed \$250,000 and hundreds of hours of work by this time next year over an eight-year period.

And we are simply carrying forward the care and development of this place, this house and its grounds, that has been cared for and developed for the past 133 years. Our history group is going back through records to put together a book that charts who helped make St. Luke's possible over the years. Around the nave are some furnishings with plaques that are memorials of the gifts given to provide for these pews and other parts of this space. We continue in the work they began.

And yet... Not one stone shall be left upon another.

The church is never merely the building. The nation is never merely its great halls and capitol and monuments.

It is what happens in these spaces and from these spaces that is the heart of things. Otherwise, they are empty halls of memory, ghost-spaces, "white-washed sepulchres" as Jesus said – clean and bright on the outside, dead on the inside.

What is St. Luke's here for? What is this space here to be?

This place exists to be our station, our learning ground and place of practice, our launching pad for service and witness, our homebase for support of each other and the community, and a house of prayer. This place exists for the world around us, where we hail and hope for and seek to partner with Christ in God's new creation and kingdom of peace. Day after day, week after week, year after year. And that, my dear friends is our true work which we can never neglect or grow weary from doing. To show and share God's incredible, life-giving, liberating love that makes all things new. Not just as long as these walls stand, but on and on and on, wherever and whenever we live.