

26th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 11.13.16
Scripture: Isaiah 12
Luke 21:5-19

When I first began as a parish minister, there was a lot I didn't know about Christian scripture and tradition. Actually, there was a lot I didn't know about a lot of the things you'd assume pastors would know. A weekly church-goer for those first twenty-five years prior to my enrollment in divinity school, I just knew worship was a place where I felt known, recognized, understood. I had a healthy, happy congregation. I had a smart, serious, gentle pastor. As for who Paul was, I sort of knew. As for Moses, he was the one at the Red Sea, right? As for Abraham, umm... And as for Jesus, I knew the basic plot line, and a few salient details. But his nature, his function in the world, his purpose and affect—that was all before me yet to discover.

Preaching weekly is a good way to discover it. In the beginning, it would take me forever to write a sermon because the research I had to do often started with the basics. Who was Jeremiah, when did he prophesy and why? What's the significance of the fact that Cleopas on the road to Emmaus had no apparent significance? Did you know there are *two* creation stories in the Bible? Why two? And what about the miracles—how are we to understand all those miracles? And what about parables—why did Jesus speak in parables?

Slowly, slowly, I found my way; we all did together, sometimes with many of you in the pews already knowing what had just dawned on me as breaking news.

One of things, slowly, slowly, I began to discover was something surprising about Jesus. He was a far more disruptive figure than I'd ever known him to be. In my research I read of him that he was an "end-times preacher," an "apocalyptic preacher," an "eschatological figure." I had little feeling as to what this meant, but in my head I figured this to mean that Jesus wasn't just a wise teacher or a friend to the friendless. He wasn't just a nice guy, though one who also spoke truth to power. He was, also and moreover, a figure who comes to us from beyond the safe boundaries of civilization, from outside, from outside; he was, apparently, someone who has little regard for human social constructs—these which we build out of necessity and then declare good. He was about something more than reformation or even revolution.

(But they're not good, these social structures, of course, not in an absolute sense. In truth, they're beyond the earthly hopes of reformation and revolution—because every human construct is built on the inclusion of some and the exclusion of others and even the scapegoating of some randomly chosen, unconsciously agreed upon “alien” whose life is only worth anything in its death. Every human construct is corrupt, though some less so than others. The spirit of God is the all in all, yes, yes; but sin yet pervades as ever it has and ever it will.)

So, my preaching began to flirt with ideas I'd never considered before—the upending of civilization, the unraveling of societies and powers and principalities. I was, obviously, deeply secure inside a most security-minded republic. (Or was America by this point an empire?) But I was toying with the notion of all of this coming to an end, and furthermore toying with the suspicion that this upending was somehow Jesus' doing or at least Jesus' affect.

I have to tell you, it often struck me as reckless. But what could I do? It's what I was coming to see in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This morning's gospel lection is in that same vein. On this second to last Sunday of the church year, when we as church-goers are asked to imagine an end that is not just an apocalyptic revealing following some cataclysmic collapse but an eschatological end that is the fullness of God's reign come to finish and perfect the creation that is still very much in the making, as we approach an end where we might discover the end not as an annihilation but as a fulfillment, we hear Jesus speak words of destruction that seem, if not reckless, then at least blasé. “When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he 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.’”

He was right, of course. The temple would be destroyed, would be destroyed some forty years hence as of Jesus' saying this; would already have been destroyed some ten or twenty years prior as of Luke's writing this. Jesus lived and preached around the year 30. The Temple was destroyed in the year 67. And Luke wrote his gospel narrative around the year 80. All of this was true, the facts of history that are painful in their neutrality and indisputability.

But, ultimately, so what? The Temple was felled, which is too bad. But, ultimately, so what?

This: the Temple was the center of law and the culture. The Temple was the main institution in the life of the people Israel that gave life shape, a sense of order, a sense of justice, all the things that make life together with other people possible. It was the main institution that made of what would otherwise be chaos instead civilization, society, human thriving.

But moreover this: the Temple was experienced as the point of contact between the eternal realm of the cosmic Lord and the earthly realm of nature and society. It was the umbilicus, as where a baby in utero is connected to the mother, where the baby receives sustenance and nourishment from its motherly context. The Temple was the navel. (Hence the center of a cathedral coming to be called the nave.) So, to destroy that place of connection is to destroy the connection itself. It is to cause the budding life in need of connection and sustenance, to cause it to wither and die.

Anyone who's ever suffered a miscarriage might know the desolation implied here.

People will speak of a "biblical worldview" as if that's a settled concept, an already agreed upon imaginary. I always wonder, though, what they actually mean in saying that—because there are a lot of biblical worldviews; there a lot of ways offered in the Bible for conceiving of and imagining what the world is. The Bible is a long book, a long *collection* of books, actually; and they're drawn from across several ages and cultures; and, as it speaks of things that are often beyond human knowing, it speaks in metaphor, in poetry, in "as if's," and even "what if's." So, here is one biblical worldview—that the creation is a baby in utero and the creation's Lord is its pregnant mother.

The fall of Temple, then, could well have been felt as a most hopeless situation for the people of God, this baby in utero, and a most heartbreaking turn of events for the expectant mother, the Lord.

All would be lost.

And so it would be without the social structure the Temple had provided, that there would be wars and insurrections and nation rising up against nation. There would be famines and plagues, natural disasters made worse by failing governance. And there would be false accusation, betrayal and persecution among the disciples and their families and communities.

It would be a coming undone of all things on all levels — political, religious, natural, personal. All these things must take place, Jesus said to his disciples in this final week of his life. All these things must be, he said plainly, no resistance, no argument.

The election this week: there's been a lot of analysis about what our president-elect means, about where he came from and how he succeeded, about what the electorate was saying in electing him, and about how (and even whether) he'll govern. The speculation runs the gamut, from the thought that he'll turn out to be a conventional, if conservative, president with advisors from Wall Street and Washington lobbying firms and other "elite" institutions full of "insiders," to the thought that he'll be a radical authoritarian who will act with vengeance against his adversaries, punishing toward those who are critical of him, and chilling of the free press. A man whose only newspaper endorsements came from ten papers world-wide, one of which was the official publication of the Ku Klux Klan, this is a man thought to be singularly unqualified and unfit to be president of the United States — thought so by many including me.

As to what story we'll tell ourselves as to how such a man came to occupy the Oval Office, there are already quite a few. I've seen the headlines: the five sorts of people who elected this man; the twenty-four social conditions that made this decision possible. I haven't had the heart to read them. I'm only just recovering myself. One thing I did catch sight of confirmed something I'd heard prior to the election, a Facebook post of a woman I know who lives in Florida. She's a young earth creationist, a well-off mother of two. She lives in a fancy house. She drives Porsche SUV. She wrote, "I just heard the BEST statement so far on MSNBC. Trump didn't only defeat the Democratic Party, he blew up the Republican Party as well. This is a movement that stands up to having their God mocked, having their service to this country mocked and having the Constitution of the United States mocked."

I have no idea what she's talking about. I don't know who in previous federal leadership has been mocking God, who's been mocking people in the military, and who's been mocking the Constitution. This reaction seems wildly uncoupled from actual facts. But it gives specific voice to the motivations I've heard described in the general press, from on-line posts to cable news commentary: a large portion of the electorate just wants to punch Washington D.C. in the face.

And so I wonder, is that what's happened? Do we have a bunch of nihilists who've just been given the keys to the very institutions that make America what it is? And, if so, what's the difference between the sort of undoing that motivated a large-enough minority of the electorate last Tuesday and the undoing of which Jesus so dispassionately foretold? If Jesus said essentially, "These things must be," then why not go with a leader who promises essentially, "These things I will do. I will take apart the temples of American society—decorum, respectful and honest speech, a regard for facts and human reason and consistency and intelligibility. I will menace women in society, and will amplify voices that do the same to black and brown people. I will undermine the notion that all in America have equal protection under the law and the promise that we in this country are governed by laws not men."

What's the difference between knowing that all human institutions and social constructs will eventually fall and the ascent of some certain person or people promising to help that along?

Well, that's the difference—the sure knowledge that such things will be and the gleeful toying with things that make it all happen, that hasten its happening on *my* watch, at *my* doing.

A difference also lies in the lack of what to do next, of what to do after we punch Washington in the face—because that's not a policy. That's not a way forward. That's just a reaction that might give some momentary pleasure. But then you have to do something. Then you have to build something. You can't just keep punching until you're the only one left to stand. Or, I suppose you could. I just don't know why you'd want to. It sounds lonely and frightful. When the world you've created is made by violently subduing everyone else, then you can't ever un-ball your fist.

One thing I *do* know: Jesus didn't simply foretell a terrible event, he also gave the people a vision for what happens next—but not he alone, he along with his tradition. "By your endurance you will gain your souls," he said to the disciples for whom destruction of the Temple would have been a dreadful turn of events. And this he implied, that endurance would move them through to the other side of destruction, to a new flourishing of a promised new way—would move them through, and would inspire and strengthen their being. Theirs was not merely to endure the undoing but the very act of endurance would be to open a creative new way.

Endurance, not vengeance; endurance, not punching back: endurance is the means and the aim.

For those who imagine public policy as a chief means for building up a more perfect union, this will be a painful time —because the power will rest in the hands of those who believe public policy is best when it's spare, when people (and corporations and Wall Street) are largely left to their own devices.

I happen to think this favors those who already enjoy privilege, privilege of the sort that is generations in the establishing, privilege of the sort that favors white people, men, the healthy, the wealthy. When how we are together is thought to be best decided via the private sector, then those who enjoy the privilege of all that is private will come out on top.

I happen to believe that, so this will be a painful time for me.

And yet, public policy is not the only means for building up a society in which people of all sorts, those living now and those of generations to come, might enjoy freedom and its many blessings. Really, public policy might not even be the chief means. I'm willing to be proven wrong on that account. I'm willing to give the church a try.

For this is what the church is to be—a body politic whose politics are most explicitly about love, mutual love, embodied compassion, responsible inter-relations, a hopeful and faithful stewardship of souls and of God's good creation. This is what the church might be—a body politic that stands in light and love especially when other forms of life together suffer a wounding, even a mortal wounding.

I have woken up from sleep lately heavy with heartbreak and shame. But each day offers an opportunity to endure in the hope that what might be made in the wake of the momentous decision we in America together made last week is akin to what the Lord is ever creating—a new heavens and a new earth in which all is peace and hope and delight.

It's a vision so bright that our benighted eyes this week might suffer in the contrast of our seeing. It's also a vision so bright that it might be all we can do, to live into that, to make that so. It's not enough simply to undo what has been—to tear it down, to just rip it all down, even in the name of improvement, even in the name of “draining the swamp” or “cleaning house.” It's not enough to live into some apocalypse, some cataclysm wherein what's artificial or constructed or downright false cracks apart and falls way. You also have to live into an eschaton, a promised end of fulfillment and light.

You see, people, Christians, biblical scholars, are wrong when they say that Jesus was an apocalyptic preacher, someone whose words stripped falsehood away and upended powers and principalities so to reveals what's true, what's enduring. Or rather they're not telling the whole truth. For he wasn't simply apocalyptic—a stripping that reveals; he was also eschatological—a putting forth of an alternate vision of what shall be and so what is.

And that's the difference between gleeful nihilism and faithful Christianity—nihilism gleeful at the destruction and the punishing nothingness and faithfulness delighting in the promise of the new creation. It's disturbing to me when people who suppose themselves Christian mistake the former for the latter, mistake nihilism for faithfulness. But it also gives me hopeful cause to wake up on Sunday morning and to take to this pulpit so to speak again from God's creative and insistent word—that you might wake up on Monday morning to speak this word to a suffering, confused, and frightened world.

That's ever been our bounden duty, and shall be ever so.

Thanks be to God.