

The Turning of the Age

The Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ, According to Luke

21:5-19

Opening Prayer

“My heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the fires of your justice burn. Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn!”

Lord God, we know that through Jesus, we have all we need to turn this world around, or even upside down. Help us to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before you, never bowing to the Temples of Injustice in this world. We ask that you send your Holy Spirit to surround and fill us, ordering our steps in your word. And the Church said Amen.

Introduction

My sermon this morning is titled “The Turning of the Age.” I’d like to draw your attention to the definition on page 7 of your bulletin. The idea of “turning” is both a nod to the idea of “revolution” and to the conscious turn we make in our lives when we choose to follow Jesus. It refers to significant “change.”

“Change.” For many of us, that word may elicit many different feelings. We may not like it, we may deny it, we may resist it, but the reality is that things are constantly changing. I know that as a “creature of habit”, I sometimes struggle with change. How many of you also sometimes struggle with idea of change?

Our world is constantly changing, the church is constantly changing, and our lives are constantly changing. This is the “turning.”

Sometimes, this process of “turning” is welcome. But there are many days in which this process brings a sense of loss or a fear of loss. There are days in our life when we look out and notice the world is different and nothing seems quite familiar to us. You and I both know these days. We all have stories of these days. Those stories may be about the failing health, or the death of a loved one, a concerning diagnosis, a divorce, a significant change in leadership, a disruption in our routine, or a day in which we experienced failure. They are stories about realizing the life you are living is not necessarily the life you wanted, the day in which someone confronted you about your addiction, or the day in which you became a parent or caretaker of your own parent. They are the stories of the dreams and hopes that never came true.

These are the days when the temples of our life and world are thrown down.

It's not just our individual temples, but we can also look to our collective temples. As a parish, we are having to face the reality that our church is changing. We are reexamining what it means to be a church in this world. We are in the process of "turning" and the emerging church is awaiting its birth. For many people still, the Episcopal Church is not the church they remember. It is not like it used to be when they were growing up. Things have changed. For them, the temple they knew is being thrown down and something new is being built.

As a country, the temples of our various social systems are also "turning." Every day in our society we see these temples failing our people- with growing inequities, growing disparities, and a rise in hate, fear, and greed. Racism, Sexism, Classism, Heterosexism and other "systems of oppression" are on the rise. The temple of our economic system is in ruins, with near 140 million people in poverty or low wealth. Some may even point out the system itself is rigged in favor of a very privileged few. There will be a time when we can no longer count on these systems and institutions. "From the halls of power to the fortress tower, no stone will be left on stone."

Globally, we are witnessing an unprecedented change in climate and read of wars, disasters, plagues, and famines. We hear of nations against nation, kingdoms against kingdoms, and even religions against other religions. Our sense of security, peace, and diplomacy have given away to fragmentation with the rise of fear, violence, and terrorism. Temples are falling everywhere.

We all have temples. Some have been handed down to us, others we have built for ourselves. Sometimes these temples are good for us and sometimes they are not. Our temples can be people, places, values and beliefs, systems, institutions, and even our very dreams and aspirations. They are the things that we think structure and order our lives, giving us meaning, a sense of identity, and provide us with security and stability. At least we think they do, until that time in which they fall.

So Where Do We Find Jesus in today's Gospel?

As we near the "turning" of our liturgical season and move into advent, you may notice that our days are getting shorter and our scripture readings get darker. They speak of the revelation of the end times and the trials and tribulations to come for Jesus' followers. As the light fades for us we await the light of Christ, who will enter the world.

This morning, we find Jesus in Luke's account near the end of his ministry, sometime around Tuesday of Holy Week. Jesus has already entered the city on a donkey, is still teaching and preaching in his radical nonviolent revolutionary way and the authorities are looking for a way

to arrest him. He is aware of own pending trial and tribulation when he and his followers arrive at the Temple in Jerusalem.

The people around Jesus speak about the grand temple, its beauty and impressiveness, with all the stones and gifts dedicated to God. It was their symbol, a structure of their Jewish identity, community and life.

Jesus, seizing a teachable moment, offers some last instructions about what to expect in the days to come. He looks at the temple and says “The days will come with not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” In this passage, Jesus is speaking about more than just the physical temple in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem temple includes every temple you and I have.

So what do we do on the day these temples fall?

(1) Do not be distracted

It is so easy in this world to be distracted from our mission as followers of Jesus. What are we called to do? We can look to the church’s Five Marks of Mission or even more simply the double commandment of loving God with all our heart and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Sometimes, the very temples we build up distract us from our calling. They are simply bad and serve as a hindrance to our work as a church. We get so caught up in a particular tradition, system, or institution that we forget who we are. When these types of earthly temples fall, it actually helps us recenter and prepare for the reign of God.

Other times, after our temple falls, we look for scapegoats, someone to blame or demonize. We generate WE vs THEM mentalities which clouds our ability to see the image of God in others. In our communities, we see how Muslims are blamed for violence in the world or LGBTQ+ people are blamed for conflict within the church. Democrats and Republicans get isolated into their echo chambers blaming each other for the state of the world. We look for someone or a group that does not think, act, or believe like we do. This is a distraction.

In my own spiritual journey and in my work as an Interfaith Chaplain who routinely engages with people of various faith traditions, I often reflect on how even our very concept of “religion” can hinder our mission as a distraction. I also reflect on the words of retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong who said:

“Every church I know claims we are the one true church, having some ultimate authority- we have the infallible Pope, we have the inerrant Bible. The idea that the

truth of God can be bound in any human system or by any human creed, by any human book is almost beyond imagination for me. I mean God is not a Christian, a Jew, or Muslim, or Hindu, or Buddhist... all of those are human systems which human beings have created to try and help us walk into the mystery of God. I honor my tradition, I walk through my tradition, but I don't believe my tradition defines God but rather points me to God."

This posture helps me practice humility, be open to the movement of the spirit, and be a better Christian.

The good news is that our "revolution" has already been won. In his ministry, Jesus spoke about the reign of God and the Kingdom (or KIN-dom) we are called to co-construct. The process of change helps move us forward to that age when all our systems, institutions, and temples of the world will be thrown down by God. We just have to remember to avoid distractions.

(2) Do not be deceived

Jesus also says "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." He wants to prevent us from being deceived.

Throughout human history we have seen the ways in which faith traditions have been used to camouflage meanness, corruption, greed. In fact, even the Christian tradition and the person of Jesus has been hijacked by some to promote their own power and control mechanisms. Think of the many times in which scripture or church teaching has been used to promote wars, genocide, or to subjugate people of color, women, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. When this occurs, we witness theological malpractice. We see Ego being elevated to a place of a false idol and the birth of a "Slaveholder Religion." A religion built on POWER and CONTROL. This was the subject of most of my study in seminary. This is one of those bad, but grand temples, deceiving people. It is one that as followers of Christ, we are called to throw down.

In fact the rise of Christianity as a worldwide faith is directly tied to the rise of empire. As empire wove its way into the tradition, Christianity changed. Churches began to resemble government buildings. In fact, the church became a tool of the government, instilling more and more mechanisms of power and control. I was able to study this closely as a student when I lived at Vatican City in 2009 and 2010. I was able to see the historical evolution of Christian communities. This is also an area I look forward to exploring more critically with about 30 Cal Poly students this summer when we head to Rome, Italy. There are lessons we can uncover

when we juxtapose the rise of western civilization with contemporary issues of concern, one of which is how empire deceives us.

So how do you know when you have been deceived?

Jesus also taught us that. The experience of sound Christian teaching should always show good fruit, not bad fruit. From the inclusion of the gentiles to abolition of slavery to practices of radical hospitality and inclusion, we must always reevaluate how we interpret our texts and traditions in light of our mission. It is our responsibility as Christians to know Jesus and the basic truths of our faith- and speak from those truths. We must know the difference and reclaim the name of Jesus from “Slaveholder Religion” when our faith is used to cause harm in the world. As we grow in our faith and relationship with one another and God, this becomes easier and a skill for the “turning” of the age.

(3) Do not be afraid

Lastly, Jesus calls us to recognize that the path he leads us on is not the easiest path. We are likely to see a lot in this world that will trouble us. We cannot allow our lives to be controlled or determined by fear. We must be faithful, steadfast, and persist. We may be oppressed, persecuted or betrayed as we aid in the turning of the age and the journey may be very difficult. We must remember that God is still in control. Jesus calls us to be present and faithful in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. If we cannot find God there, in our present circumstances, even in the midst of our own temple ruins, we will find God nowhere.

As the hands, feet, and voice of Jesus in this world, we are what the prophet Isaiah called the “Repairers of the Breach.” That breach between each other and God is what must be addressed in the turning of this age. As a church, we can usher in the age and repair the breach by developing a stronger relationship with ourselves, with each other, and with God, through Christ Jesus. Knowing Jesus will inform how we show up in this world.

It is in the place of the fallen temples in which God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, declares:

“I am about to create new heavens and new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.”

We discover that God has always been with us - in the changes, in chances, and in the chaos that is life; in pain, in loss, in disappointment; in the destruction of our “Jerusalem temples”. Be persistent, practice patience, and do not be afraid.

Conclusion

If we take the advice of Jesus, of not being distracted, deceived, or afraid, we can better navigate the turning of the age as his “messengers”. Endurance, persistence, and faith are the ways in which we offer to God the fallen stones of our temples. Stone by stone, God will rebuild our lives in ways we could not, restore beauty to our lives and to the world, and a new temple will arise from the rubble. Stone by stone, we become the temple of God without a need for temples of our own.

Amen.