Crisis and Opportunity
A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
On November 17th, 2013

Luke 21:5-19

Today's scripture text from the 21st chapter of the Gospel of Luke (in which Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, wars and rumors of wars and earthquakes and famines and plagues, and the persecution of his followers) is the assigned Gospel reading for today. It's one of those scripture passages that mainline preachers look at and think, “Maybe today would be a good day to skip the lectionary, or, perhaps I could focus on the epistle reading or the Old Testament lesson for the day, maybe do a little reflection on the Psalm.”

Our inclination is to avoid texts like Luke 21 because we know that the original intention of the passage often gets lost. It was first meant to serve as a way for 1st century Christians to understand what they were watching or had watched unfold (the Roman army razing Herod’s magnificent temple, various people rising up and pretending to be saviors, followers of Jesus being imprisoned and dragged in front of tribunals and sometimes killed, even friends and family members betraying each other to the authorities). Those things happened, and Luke (and Matthew and Mark) depict Jesus as predicting that they would.

In the nearly 2,000 years since, some Christians have approached texts like this not as foretelling what happened in the first century, but as a guide to putting current events (in whatever century they happened to be living) into the framework of the imminent demise of the world. I want you to hear the text not so much as a prediction of what must come before the world ends (all things come to an end, sure enough, and our planet is under stress, and it may and will eventually end), but as a guide for how to live and to hold onto what really matters when it feels like what you're going through is the end of the world as you know it. Listen now for God's word to us all.

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, 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.'

They asked him, 'Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?' And he said, '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.

'When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.' Then he said to them, 'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.'
‘But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. **This will give you an opportunity to testify.** So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. 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.**

One of the enduring images from the aftermath of the devastation that Typhoon Haiyan wreaked on The Philippines is the picture of a giant statue of Jesus, robed in white and arms outstretched, which improbably and some say miraculously, came through the storm unscathed. The giant Jesus stands in Leyte, looking over the ruins of Tacloban. And standing there that statue raises for us the age-old, disturbing, and not easily answered question.

“Where is God? Where is God when enormous natural disasters like typhoons, tsunamis, and earthquakes hit? Where is God? For that matter, where is God when your best laid plans come to naught, when the business fails, when the diagnosis is terminal, when the parents are aging or the child you love so deeply is in pain? Where is God when your own body is betraying you, when everything in your life seems to be turning upside down? Where is God when standing up for what you believe in, when standing up for Love, means facing persecution?” Where is God?

The Jewish people of the first century in the Common Era did not have a giant statue of Jesus to symbolize God’s presence in their midst. They had, instead, a Temple: a magnificent, ornate, structure for worship, gleaming white, glittering with gold. The larger temple complex itself was huge, crafted with enormous stones, some of them weighing well over 100 tons, and during Herod’s time it had been enlarged to an area of about 35 acres. It was big. The Temple Complex was big and quite impressive. It could make somebody stop and take notice.

When you were on pilgrimage to Jerusalem and you came over the Mount of Olives, you could see it, and it was glittering, it was white, it was amazing. As people were admiring the Temple, our text for this morning says, Jesus said, “You see these things? There will come a time when not one stone will be left on top of another. All of it is going to come down.”

Now we know from history that just about 40 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the Temple was indeed destroyed. The Roman armies came in to quash rebellion, they battered the structure down, they burned what would burn, they killed what and who they could kill, and they left a pile of ruins.

We know from history, too, that just as it was hard to be Jewish during that time period, it was hard to be a member of the budding Christian movement. There was pressure from the established religious authorities to do away with what they saw to be a threat to the religious order. There was pressure from the Roman political authorities to eliminate what they saw to be a threat to the state. The Empire brooked no opposition to its rule. And it was not easy to stand against it.
The longer I’m in pastoral ministry, the more I get surprised when people speak of having faith in God as if that means somehow means getting to avoid real hardship in life, as if it means that life is going to be one big green light, that prosperity and material blessings will just flow in and we’ll get a pass on tragedy and trauma. You know, if I come to church and make my pledge and volunteer and I am generally a pretty good person, well then no misfortune will ever befall me. And if misfortune does come, then somehow I’ll know that I’ve been sold a bill of goods about this faith thing. Because after all, if you’re faithful, good things come, right?

The more I read scripture and the more I pay attention to the way life unfolds around me, the more I’ve come to understand that faith doesn’t mean we get to avoid things that we wish wouldn’t happen. It means that we have the tools to deal with them when they do.

When Jesus stands looking at the temple and says, “There will come a day when not one stone is left upon another” What he’s saying, I think, is “pay attention, folks, to what really matters.” Because this thing that you’re looking at, as impressive as it is, it’s not going to last. In fact, no THING will. Not even giant statues of Jesus in the Philippines. All things come to an end. That’s the way of things.

One of the treasures Buddhists bring to interreligious dialogue is the concept of the illusion of permanence. Buddhists will tell you that we human beings have a built-in illusory notion of permanence, a belief that “things” somehow last forever. But the reality is that life is transient, that time and tide change all things and that all things pass. We are not permanent, and neither are the things we think we own and the things we have convinced ourselves we control. All things pass.

You see this when you look at pictures at a memorial service. The young serviceman, getting ready to head off to serve in the war, dressed so sharply in his uniform. The girl with the faraway look in her eye. And you know that the little children in their shorts with their little cute bow ties on gathered around a young mother and father in the picture are now the sixty and seventy year olds who are laying their parent to rest. And that is the ideal scenario. That’s not taking into account the parents burying a child or the person whose life ends tragically too soon and seemingly randomly because of an accident, an illness, or a shooting.

We think that we’ll be around forever, especially when we’re young, and perhaps that’s a really good defense mechanism, it allows us to function. It doesn’t necessarily help us with making wise decisions before we’re 25, but it allows us to function. We think that there are certain structures and institutions that will never change, never fade (like the gleaming temple) but the truth is that the Buddhists really are right there is a fundamental impermanence at the heart of existence.

So what lasts? What matters? That’s probably a better way to put it. What matters? The psalmist says, “The grass withers and the flower fades but the word of the Lord endures forever.” What is that word? And what does it call us to do and to be? That’s the question that the statue of
Jesus, gleaming white, standing over Tacloban asks. And it’s the question that Christ asks in our text for this morning, too.

What is the word that will endure? The word that will endure, I think, is Love. So how do we live in love? What does love call us to do in these bodies that will wear out, with these minds that eventually will go? What does love call us to do for the people in the Philippines? We can give of our money. We can pray. We can really care. Because compassion is what matters.

The people to whom Luke 21 was originally written knew that they would undergo hardship, difficult times; not in spite of their faith (do you get that? Not in spite of their faith), but because of it. They knew they would endure hardship and difficult times, and what Jesus says in the Gospel of Luke is that when these things happen, it will be an opportunity for you: An opportunity for you to testify. Which doesn’t mean have lots and lots of words that you’ve prepared in advance to say, it means to live like the people who know that love is embodied in Jesus and in you live.

I watched a very, very difficult movie to watch on Monday. And if you haven’t watched it yet, I encourage you to watch it. Judith and I went, against my better judgment, because I like for my Mondays, to kind of be, I don’t know, happy. Against my better judgment we went to see Twelve Years a Slave. As a friend of mine said, “If you want your American history raw and unvarnished, see that movie.”

We saw it. The movie showed us people who claimed to be Christian treat other human beings like beasts. We saw how dehumanizing that was for the slaveowners and the overseers and of course for the slaves themselves. And I thought to myself, that was an opportunity for these slaveowners to testify! Why didn’t they stand up for what was right?”

At the end of the movie, no spoiler alert, at the end of the movie there’s a man who testifies. He takes a risk, because he knows that it matters, and he knows that this slave, this fellow human being, matters.

Our passage ends with the words “that not a hair of your head will perish and by your endurance you will gain your souls.” When I read that I thought, “I’m a little confused here, because he’s speaking to people who are going to die, and he’s saying not a hair of your head will perish. What’s he trying to say? Is he trying to say that all of these disciples who are going to be killed are going to die with a full head of hair?”

I think he was saying that God numbers every hair on our head, and every hair that used to be there for some of us. He was saying that even though life is impermanent, that we matter, and that by our endurance, which literally in the Greek means to stand up underneath, to abide under, by your ability to abide under the truth that things pass, we do gain our souls.

So what is love calling you to do and to be? In Jesus’ name. Amen.