

Your Endurance

Luke 21:5-19

What frightens you? Is it sickness, yours or a loved one? Is it death? Is it civil unrest: protests, riots, violence? Is it the economy: worries about money or employment? Is it political or religious leadership? Is it natural disasters: earthquakes, famines, plagues: Zika, Ebola, Ecoli or other viruses? Are you afraid of what life will be like when the things you have known all your life are changed or aren't present anymore? Is it end-times events: the rapture, the tribulation, the Second coming? If so, you are not alone. As our scripture opened, Jesus engaged in public dialogue with people about the beautiful Jerusalem temple (vv. 5-7). As it continued, Jesus spoke about future times of false leadership, violence, and suffering (vv. 8-11), about arrest, persecution, and endurance (vv. 12-19), and about destruction of Jerusalem that would signal the eventual coming of the Son of Man (vv. 20-36).

The magnificent temple in Jerusalem during the lifetime of Jesus was the result of a rebuilding project started by King Herod in 19 BCE. Herod more than doubled the size of the Temple Mount. It was like the World Trade Center of its day. People could gather in large colonnades or porches around the Temple Mount for various purposes, including speech making and healing (see Acts 3:11; 5:12). While the temple itself was completed in eighteen months, work on the outer courts and decorations continued throughout Jesus' lifetime and more than 30 years beyond his earthly lifetime, until 62-64 CE. So for Jesus and most of the people with whom he spoke, they knew no life without the beautiful temple. But Jesus

said as beautiful and stable as it was, "not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down" (v. 6).

Jesus said during the time leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, many people either would take action to defy the governing powers or would be suspected of doing so and would be destroyed by Herodian or Roman soldiers. A current Web site lists fifteen leaders between 4 BCE and 70 CE who were perceived to have defied the Romans and were destroyed. Jesus said the appearance of various leaders, some claiming to be Jesus or at least divine ("I am he!") and some predicting the end of time, would be the first sign that the destruction of the Jerusalem temple would soon take place (v. 7).

After Jesus warned about people who would come to lead them astray, he described terrible events that would grow in ever greater in magnitude. These events represented the turmoil that would increase until the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. First, there would be wars and insurrections (v. 9); referring to the rapid succession of four Roman emperors in 69 CE prior to the siege and destruction of Jerusalem. Second, nations and kingdoms would rise up against one another (v. 10). Third, there would be great earthquakes, and in some places famines and plagues (v. 11a); and the time between Jesus' earthly life and the destruction of Jerusalem there was a famine in the time of Claudius (Acts 11:28; ca. 47 CE) and an earthquake in Philippi (Acts 16:26; ca. 50 CE). Fourth, "there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven" (v. 11b). Scholars have noted Josephus' account of a star resembling a sword and a comet at the burning of the Jerusalem temple (*War* 6.289).

Next Jesus said that arrests, persecution, trials, betrayal by family members, and hatred against them would all occur before the sequence of turmoil that led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (v. 12) Then Jesus told of the people of the church to endure and thus "gain [their] souls" (v. 19). Jesus described the

destruction of Jerusalem in the way it happened, namely, being "surrounded by armies" (v. 20) as Rome enacted "days of vengeance" against a rebellious population (v. 22). In a similar way, Jesus described the sufferings and hardships of his followers, as they would be arrested (v. 12a; cf. Acts 4:3; 5:18; 12:1; 21:27) and be "handed over" to authorities (v. 12b; cf. Acts 21:11; 28:17). They would testify before kings and governors (vv. 12-13; cf. Acts 24-26) and present wisdom that others would not be able to withstand (v. 15; cf. Stephen in Acts 6:10).

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Like the people in our scripture, every generation, at some time in its history, has thought its time was the end of time—and the dawn of the twenty-first century has been no exception. Our generation can reflect upon experiences of war, natural disaster, and political chaos as fodder for apocalyptic possibility.

Most of us remember where we were and what we were doing on September 11, 2001, when nineteen terrorists associated with Al-Qaeda hijacked four commercial airline jets. The sight of hundreds of military tanks streaming across the desert toward Baghdad as part of the "shock and awe" campaign is emblazoned on the American imagination. On December 26, 2004, the world was startled by a tsunami in Indonesia, one of the deadliest natural disasters in history. Many people have vivid memories of news footage from New Orleans during and after Hurricane Katrina. Jesus' directions to the disciples concerning what they ought to do in times of chaos and destruction were quite challenging then, and are equally challenging for us today.

As we reflect on Jesus' words, things sound familiar as we also experience: imposters who come and try to trick the faithful; war and conflict rage on; and natural disasters are prevalent. Jesus assures the disciples that the end times were in the future and that they would not happen all at once. Then Jesus said to them and us: "This will give you an opportunity to testify." Jesus told the disciples that

their testimony must not be rehearsed or "canned." Instead, they should rely on the undeniable wisdom that would be given them in the moment. Jesus said the reward for their testimony and their endurance of their catastrophic times would be the gaining of their very souls.

Did Jesus really mean that suffering is opportunity for testimony? If so, what kind of testimony does a faithful person give in the face of death, betrayal, and the execution of loved ones? Most of us are accustomed to and want to give testimonies that praise God for good times, good things, blessings of redemption, healing, rescue, and salvation. Testimony is usually reserved for the stories that declare how God brought the faithful out of slavery into freedom, how God made a way when there was no way; how God acted to save a distressed people. The words of Jesus in this passage are for us when we experience destruction, betrayal, and loss; we are to see these times as opportunities to testify. What kind of testimony do we give in the face of great suffering and great hatred?

"Suffering always means pain, disruption, separation, and incompleteness," writes Shawn Copeland. "It can render us powerless and mute; push us to the borders of hopelessness and despair." The opportunity to testify during times of destruction is, in part, the audacity to muster courage in the face of fear, the boldness to speak in the face of suffering. Great suffering changes some people and defeats others, but for those who endure—our very souls are gained.

Suffering provides an opportunity for those of us who have been changed to tell of our hope. For some, the change brought about by suffering is tangible, literal, physical. Howard Thurman, brilliant African American theologian, has seen suffering change people: "Into their faces come a subtle radiance and a settled serenity; into their relationships a vital generosity that opens the sealed doors of the heart in all who are encountered along the way."

An opportunity for testimony born out of a time of loss, grief, and chaos is recorded in the song "Precious Lord," written by Thomas Dorsey. Thomas Dorsey, born in 1889 in rural Georgia, was a prolific songwriter and an excellent gospel and blues musician. While a young man, Dorsey moved to Chicago and found work as a piano player in the churches as well as in clubs and playing in theatres. Struggling to support his family, Dorsey divided his time between playing in the clubs and playing in the church. After some time of turbulence, Dorsey devoted his artistry exclusively to the church.

In August of 1932, Dorsey left his pregnant wife in Chicago and traveled to be the featured soloist at a large revival meeting in St. Louis. After the first night of the revival, Dorsey received a telegram that simply said, "Your wife just died." Dorsey raced home and learned that his wife had given birth to a son before dying in childbirth. The next day his son died as well. Dorsey buried his wife and son in the same casket and withdrew in sorrow and agony from his family and friends. He refused to compose or play any music for quite some time. While still in the midst of despair, Dorsey said that as he sat in front of a piano, a feeling of peace washed through him. He heard a melody in his head that he had never heard before and began to play it on the piano. That night, Dorsey recorded this testimony while in the midst of suffering:

Precious Lord, take my hand,
Lead me on, let me stand;
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;
Through the storm, through the night,
Lead me on to the light;
Take my hand, precious Lord,
Lead me home.

Nancy Lynne Westfield

Remember we are invited not to be terrified (v. 9), regardless of the times or the situation. This is possible because of the promises of God in Christ that "not a hair of your head will perish" (v. 18) and "by your endurance you will gain your souls" (v. 19). We can be quiet, confident and safe in the hands of Our Lord, Our Savior Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit.

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