

The Burning Temples
A Sermon for the 25th Sunday after Pentecost, November 14th, 2010
Haggai 2:9; Isaiah 65:17-25 and Luke 21:5-19

“The future splendor of this Temple will be greater than that of former times,’ the Lord who rules over all declares, ‘and in this place I will give peace.’” These are great words of hope from the little prophet Haggai, words of hope for exiles who had returned from Babylon late in the sixth century BC, returning to a Temple in rubble, a Jerusalem in ruins, and with little cause for hope after at least five decades of being away. Nonetheless, the prophet preaches that “The latter splendor . . . shall be greater than the former. . . and in Jerusalem I will give peace.” “. . . And in *yerushalayim* I will give *shalom*.”

To those same exiles, most of whom had never seen Jerusalem, the LORD announces through the prophet Isaiah, “. . . Look, I am ready to create new heavens and a new earth! The former ones will not be remembered; no one will think about them anymore. But be happy and rejoice forevermore over what I am about to create!”

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” That’s the way we have learned it; but try it this way, “In the beginning God *began* to create the heavens and the earth.” God does not simply finish off creation once and for all, then leave it for eternity, but God begins and continues, as Isaiah sees it, to ‘create new heavens and a new earth.’”

“What we need around this church is something new.” I’ve been hearing it now for decades from people who have been ransacked by the ravages of time and washed ashore by the stormy tides of change. “We need some new program,” we say to each other, “We need some new attraction that will grab the attention of others; some new spirit, some new music, some new publicity, some new technology, anything, anything new, new, I say.” You see, we’ve tried the old solutions, the former strategies, the previous programs. It seems we’ve tried everything; and, you know what, none of them seems to change much of anything. The walls of Jerusalem and the glory of the Temple seem to lay there in a heap just as they did for decades after the exiles’ return. So, we need something fresh, we say, something not yet thought of, we think, something brand new.

Why? Well, maybe because all of us are in a fix of some sort or another. We continue to do the same old things the same way, being drawn into the same old habits that have dominated us for years, unable to bring about the change that we so desperately need. In one way or another, we’re all in a fix, like the mythical Sisyphus whose punishment is to spend every day trying to roll an immense boulder to the top of a hill, only to watch it roll back down, and to repeat this task every day throughout eternity. You may remember that Sisyphus received this punishment because of his proud belief that he was smarter than Zeus, the god of the Greek pantheon. “Well, Sisyphus,” the story seems to suggest, “if you think you’re so much smarter than Zeus, then go ahead, try to do it yourself.”

We come home from exile in Babylon, expecting to see the glorious past, expecting to regain our identity, but all we see is the rubble of the past. The past is long gone and there appears to be no future. Even though we’re home from Babylon, we’re still in exile. Tomorrow we’ll again start rolling the boulder to the top of the hill. Everything, it seems, is in a fix.

Even the nightly news is in a fix. I’d like to know what’s so new about the same old thing? So, many of us have simply given up on the news. Just couldn’t take it anymore: piling on one impossible situation after another, drubbing us with one disastrous tragedy after another. Who needs it, especially every night at 10 o’clock? What we need to hear is something that is really new, something besides standing there watching the same old boulder rolling back down the hill every day. And please don’t tell me about the latest thing in the “self-help” section at your local Borders bookstore. Sure, it may offer some help, some relief from whatever ails us, but for me, it just doesn’t go far enough, not deep enough, not radical enough, not new enough. And I’m sorry, “Dr. Phil,” but I just don’t agree that “Only you can cure what is wrong with you.” Maybe a little bit, maybe some of the time, but not very much, especially when it comes to the fixes that I’m in that I am just

not able to fix.

Let's admit it, we are creatures of habit. We are stuck in our ruts. We often feel very trapped in our jobs, relationships, illnesses, aging and crippled bodies, disturbed and distressed minds. Most of us are doing what we do, not because it brings us great joy, but it is simply what we do in order to cope with life and the fears that haunt it.

You see, I don't need anymore of my self and my self-help. I've had enough. The fact is, I can't help myself. What I need is to be rescued from my self. I need a savior. "A drowning man [or woman] cannot pull himself out of the water by his own hair," Luther insisted, "Neither can you do it. Someone else must rescue you."

I have often treasured St. Paul's words in Romans 7 where he surely speaks for all of us who have had to face the truth about ourselves: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . I can will what is right, but I cannot do it."

The prophet Jeremiah asks, perhaps a bit sarcastically, "Can Ethiopians change their skin or leopards their spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil."

Nicodemus is in the dark when he wonders how it is possible for a man to be born when he is old: "Can he enter his mother's womb a second time and be born?"

"Yesterday I was a dog, today I am a dog," Snoopy laments in a Peanuts cartoon, "And tomorrow I'll still be a dog." He sighs, then thinks to himself, "There's so little room for improvement."

Newness, genuine change, seems so elusive. The allegedly "new and improved model" turns out to be pretty much the same old thing. But at a much deeper, existential level, I often wonder in my prayers, "When will I ever get the change that I seem so desperately to need?"

The biblical witness everywhere affirms that real newness, genuine relief, radical transformation comes, not through your own measly efforts, but only as a gift of God through faith. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for," the letter to the Hebrews explains, "the conviction of things not seen."

On this *last Sunday* before the *Last Sunday* of the Church Year, we come to the *last scene* of Jesus' public ministry where he stands at the Temple and points to the end. Somebody gets Jesus started with a rather innocent remark about the magnificence of the Jerusalem Temple, "how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God." In fact, the first century Jewish historian Josephus writes that the Temple in Jerusalem "appeared from a distance like a snow-clad mountain, for all that was not overlaid with gold was of purest white . . . more worthy of description than any [temple] under the sun." And Jesus whirls around and counters all this by declaring that the Temple will have an end, "There won't be a stone left standing on a stone," he says, "all will be thrown down . . ." And he was right. That day would come less than forty years later when the Temple and Jerusalem were plundered *again* and finally destroyed over the course of about four years, burnt to the ground by the Romans who were fed up with the Jewish rebellions.

That is the last we have heard of the Jerusalem Temple. "Not one stone left upon another." Judaism began to accelerate in its rabbinic form; and Jewish believers in Jesus as the messiah regarded his body raised from the dead as the new temple, the new locus of God's presence in creation.

When you think about it, and most of us don't like to think about it, every temple is a doomed house, including our own bodies which the Apostle in Corinthians calls "temples of the Holy Spirit." Every temple is burning. "Time like an ever rolling stream, / Soon bears us all away;" we sing, "We fly forgotten as a dream / Dies at the op'ning day." "[But] if for this life only we have hoped," says Paul, again in Corinthians, "then we really are most of all to be pitied."

After all his talk about the end, curiously Jesus tells his friends, ". . . But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

There is newness coming, but newness is not painless. "The truth will set you free," Jesus reminds us in

John, but before it does, to use a paraphrase, it will make you miserable. For something to be born, something has to die. For us to enter a new world, we have to let go of an old one. For us to enter a new church, for us to enter a new body, for us to enter a new freedom, we have got to let go of an old one. And letting go of old worlds and old ways, letting go of old addictions and old patterns of behavior, letting go of all that we depend upon and all that we have ever lived for, well, this is very, very painful and frightening.

Yet, Jesus assures us, “the one who saves his life will lose it, and the one who loses her life will save it.”

“Very truly, I tell you,” says Jesus, again in John’s Gospel, “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

Years ago, I walked through England’s Coventry Cathedral which was laid to ruins by firebombs in World War II. A stunning new structure rose from the ruins which became a witness to the world to peace and to resurrection. Engraved in the floor near the entrance of the church is the arresting declaration: “To the Glory of God this cathedral burnt.” And just outside, carved on the old burnt-out walls, is the little prophet Haggai’s great promise: “The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former.”

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“So it is with the resurrection of the dead,” Paul concludes his first letter to the Corinthians, “What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.”