

Sermon
St. Mary's Nanoose
November 6, 2016.
Luke 21:5-19

Have you heard the story where the spiritual seeker on the streets of New York? He approaches a hotdog vendor and says, "Make me one with everything." When the vendor hands him a hotdog dripping with all the sauces, he hands over a ten-dollar bill which the vendor pockets. "What about my change?" the seeker asks. The vendor replies, "Everyone knows that change comes from within."

In light of our reading today from Luke, there is much in the story of our seeker in New York that resonates. The only constant we can count on in life is change. And the only thing that will see us through all the change that life throws us, is God.

The passage opens innocuously enough with Jesus and his followers at the Temple in Jerusalem. Imagine the scene.... a group of peasants and farmers have followed Jesus into the "big city" and are standing in awe of this magnificent structure. Just how magnificent? Listen to this description of the Temple by the 1st century historian, Josephus:

"Now the outward face of the temple was covered all over with plates of gold of great weight, and, at the first rising of the sun, reflected back a very fiery splendor, and made those who forced themselves to look upon it to turn their eyes away, just as they would have done at the sun's own rays."

The Temple in Jerusalem was built to impress. Historians today tell us that the temple was big enough to hold 400,000 people. You can well imagine that Jesus' followers would have been awe-struck.

But Jesus cuts short their "oohing" and "ahhing." He says: "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." What could he possibly mean? How could something so solid be razed to the ground?

Yet, just as Jesus predicted.... many things would come to a shocking end. Jesus would die the death of a common criminal, the Temple would be demolished in the Jewish war some 40 years after he died; and his followers would be persecuted for spreading his gospel. Everything that was familiar, everything that seemed solid, everything they knew would come to an end.

His followers had a hard time believing his words. But Jesus wanted to prepare them. Over and over, in this gospel and in others he was teaching them: Don't get fooled by status, wealth, the trappings, the transient – that's not where life is. They're mesmerized by glittering gold, yet Jesus is *right there* with them!

How much are we like these people in the temple with Jesus? What are we distracted by? How well are we listening? Where is our attention? How much has changed since Jesus' day?

In this culture we are encouraged to place our faith, trust and hope in things: in our investments, our looks, our possessions, our houses, our status, in the routines of our days. Or in people who offer

easy answers, soothing words, get rich quick plans. Yet Jesus says, "Don't look outside for your hope, it doesn't, and can't lie there."

Whatever we create for our pleasure, security or future can and will be destroyed, either through the passage of time, forces of nature or human exploit. Our hope can't possibly lie in our own creations.

So where does our hope lie? Our hope lies in the one who is warning us, teaching us, guiding us, reassuring us. The one who is with us, even in this difficult text.

But we are a fearful people. We have a hard time trusting. We feed on each other's fears. Our media thrives on, and perpetuates, fear. Fear is part of our nature. We have active imaginations. We thrive on the drama fear creates..... As Mark Twain once said, "A lot of terrible things have almost happened to me!" Our fears can get the best of us.

I've learned a lot about fear growing up in my family of origin.

My mother and father grew up in Holland in the 20's and 30's.

Rumors of German aggression escalated and suddenly, within 5 days, Holland was occupied on May 10, 1940. "We just couldn't believe it could happen," my mother told me. On that day, my parents' lives changed forever. The institutions of justice and order that had seemed impermeable became vehicles for oppression. Things that people had assumed were theirs were taken away. ...their wealth, their possessions, their rights and their freedom were simply, and often at gunpoint, taken away. Even life was no longer a right. Many people hid in their houses, consumed by fear. What did my parents

do? Their joined the Underground, their priorities suddenly very clear. My father told us, "In times of evil, it becomes very clear what is right and what is wrong."

How can we proceed in times of fear? It may not be the temple being razed, it may not be an invasion or occupation. But troubles come to all of us. Who here hasn't been betrayed by a friend or family member? Who here hasn't suffered the loss of a job, a relationship, a loved one. Who here hasn't faced an uncertain future or had health issues? It is our common experience that life can be very, very difficult. So how can we prepare ourselves for inevitable hardship? How can we anticipate and side step every possible problem?

Jesus simply says, we can't. He says don't even try. He's telling us it's not possible to control life. We can't anticipate what is to come. That's not the kind of preparation that's called for. What Jesus does say is TRUST. He says, "Trust. The words will be given to you. Trust." Over 50 times in the New Testament, Jesus says, "Fear not," or words to that effect. Fear not. OK, but how do we do a "not"?

This is obviously an important question. We have to live into this question. We have to struggle with it. We have to come to terms with our fear, make friends with it, listen to it, and find ways to breathe through it. We need to practice and be vigilant so that fear doesn't constrict or control us. We have to exercise the muscle of our hearts so that we can stay open at those times when it would be easy to shut down, lash out or despair.

This is the preparation Jesus is talking about. Doing the inner work. Preparing our hearts. Moment by moment breathing into our fears. Day by day building a prayer practice that grounds and sustains us. In this way we will be able to stand tall when we are attacked by our opponents. In this way we will be ready to receive the words that will be given us when we need to testify.

When I was 15, for some reason I developed a terrible fear of going blind. For weeks, I slept with my light on at night and lost sleep fearing the worst. I talked with others but nothing seemed to help. And then an idea came to me. I called the CNIB and offered to volunteer. They matched with a young woman 10 years older than me who had recently gone blind as a result of diabetes. I met with Jackie once a week, helping her with her banking, paperwork, sorting laundry and whatever else she needed help with. We became fast friends and I was able to turn off my light at night. Jackie's bravery and humour inspired me. She had found her way to the other side of fear and showed me how to get there. Not only that, she helped me land my first real job. I found a life I couldn't have imagine on the other side of fear.

So who nudged me to call and volunteer? I can only wonder and give thanks!

Jackie lost her sight, my parents lost their innocence, and many loved ones we all have to confront fear and loss. And yet, through the difficult times we are told God will speak to us, be with us. We discover how precious life is and give thanks.

In my home growing up, there were few illusions around “stuff.” My parents had seen the temple brought down. They knew what was important and they put their time, energy and money where their values were: family, friends, relationships, life, nature, love and service.

We are all being called to orient ourselves to that which gives life. To offer up our fears and to keep our hearts and ears open. To trust that the difficult passages in scripture and the difficult passages in life all do work unto good.

This morning we are invited to a meal; a simple meal that nourishes and builds the inner life. Eating together reminds us that we are not alone and that though we may suffer, “not a hair on our head will perish.”

Eat and drink and know the peace that passes all understanding. This is the good news.

Amen.