

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, November 13, 2022, Luke 21:5-19 (Elizabeth Felicetti)

Hearing Jesus say about the temple "the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down" takes my breath away. And I believe that was his intent. Jesus provoked and poked at the earthly things that we hold dear. When I hear that read, I don't think of the same temple Jesus was referring to: that is, the second temple in Jerusalem, painstakingly built after the exiles returned from Babylon.

When I hear that Gospel reading about no stones being left, I think about the chapel at my seminary in Alexandria which burned down in 2010. I used to get back to the seminary at least once a year, but I have not been there since the fire, because I know that seeing the area where I used to worship every day, which has now been changed into a garden, will be painful: I have been postponing have to see that place for twelve years. Which is ridiculous, I realize. I'd like to say well, I've been busy. But. For twelve years? I haven't been *that* busy, and I've been to Northern Virginia numerous times in the past twelve years.

But not there. I can't bear that the place where my godson was baptized is now gone. The place where I attended my first ordination and then began imagining what my own ordination would be like. The place where one sweaty August morning in 2004 I knelt facing a stained-glass window surrounded by the verse "Go Ye Into All the World and Preach the Gospel" and knew that I had found my purpose. A few bricks are left. Their walls surround a garden. It looks like it was tastefully done. But I can't bring myself to go. I loved that holy place.

I cannot even imagine if something happened to *this* holy place, where I knelt in the aisle and prayed words about becoming your rector, and where I have buried people I love and officiated at marriages and have baptized both adults and children and babies. Where I get to baptize another baby this morning, welcoming her into the family of God.

I can imagine how provoked Jesus' original listeners must have felt, even as I understand and agree with the values he was trying to impart. He was pointing out that buildings aren't what God's about. The church isn't the building. *We* are the church. The child we are baptizing this morning is the church. You are the church. I am the church.

So, does that mean the building doesn't matter? And if the building doesn't matter, why ask for pledges toward the considerable expense of this church, with its building and staff? Why have a work day after the 10 AM service today, if the building is just going to collapse anyway and really all that should matter is us being the church in the world?

Jesus wasn't strictly speaking about the building as a church vs. the people as the church. He was speaking apocalyptically, something that happens as the church year draws to a close. Advent starts in two weeks, which means next Sunday is Christ the King, the final Sunday in the church year. Both the end and the beginning of the church year focus on the end times, and Jesus touches on that in this reading: not only the temple being destroyed, but nation rising against nation, earthquakes, dreadful portents. Prison and betrayal by relatives and friends.

Really lovely conversation for a christening, isn't it?

Then again, young Violet, our baptismal candidate, will grow up in a world of turmoil, as babies have for millennia. We may think that there used to be good ol' days and it's too bad she missed them, but I'm sure our ancestors thought that too: that life used to be easier and less violent than it is now.

The truth is Christians have faced doom and destruction as long as there have been Christians. We worship a God who died on a cross before his glorious resurrection. When today's reading ends with "not a hair on your head will perish," we need to remember that two sentences before also says that some of us will be put to death. Jesus is not saying "get baptized and life will be easy." Jesus tells us that there is a cost to following him.

Jesus also says that, despite plagues and famine, we do not need to be afraid. We will endure and gain our souls.

This morning we will all renew our own baptismal covenants, which remind us not only of what we believe but of what that belief inspires us to do: continuing in the apostles teaching and fellowship. Repenting and returning to the Lord whenever we fall into sin. Striving for justice and peace. Cultivating an inquiring and discerning heart.

Loving this building is not a sin. Caring for it is good stewardship. But caring for the building does not relieve us of the responsibility of being the church, of carrying Christ's light out into the world. How will you do that today?