Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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November 13, 2022

*“Still Here”* Luke 21:5-19

I would like today’s sermon to be a little on the experiential side. That is: you are going to help me make my point—as I deliver my sermon, I would like you to keep looking around. Look at the people in this Sanctuary. Look out the doors to the campus and buildings, the grounds and the stream. You might not be able to see the stream from here but you can hear it.

Look at all of these things and people and think about what will ultimately remain should all else be swept away. Think of what God might just put into your heart and imagination in this moment as we are looking around. Let’s do that for just a little while, and then I will start…

In today’s story Jesus responds to the disciples’ admiration and awe at the grandeur of the Temple—its immensity and extravagance. However, instead of joining them in their surprise and wonder, Jesus tells them of a time to come when the very walls they see will be torn apart and cast down into rubble—not one rock will be left one upon another.

He tells them of a world that will catch fire with wars and upheaval, a time when people will be quick to say, “This is it! This must be the end!” He paints a very vivid picture. He tells them of a time when creation itself will revolt through natural disasters, as humans terrorize each other, and even belief in God will be under attack. Such “days will come,” says Jesus. And indeed, they have.

Jesus, through Luke, was looking forward to two things. Most immediate was the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 CE. At the time of the passage, no one could imagine such a thing happening—the Temple was bigger and grander than anything most people had ever seen.

Also, the splendor it displayed was appropriate for the holy function it accommodated. The Temple was sacred. It was the center of worship for the whole nation. It was the place where God touched the earth and communed with human beings—to heal them and to bless them and make their lives whole and safe.

And so, the Temple was impressive because it was supposed to reveal at least a portion of God’s grandeur. To think of it destroyed was so earth-shattering for the first-century Jew that, should such a thing happen, it would seem as though the end of the world was near.

So, that is what the Temple and Jesus’ words meant for the first disciples. How amazing is it that his words also speak to us and the era we find ourselves in today. Here we are, more than two thousand years later in an age where, although we belong to God, we find ourselves in a world that continues to groan as it lurches from one trauma to the next.

Ours is an age wherein we wait and watch as hurricanes that rip through Haiti, Puerto Rico, and other islands in the Caribbean before they make their way through Florida, and then up the east coast getting as far, these days, as New York and even Nova Scotia—and this is only what is happening in our own country. Jesus’ words seem to have been written for us as we receive the evening news of yet another shooting in a suburban school, or the threat of violence over the latest elections, or on airplanes, or in Walmart.

So, why are the disciples—and we—being given such a lesson? Why *this* lesson? Why the words of comfort and reassurance? Why not a little holy hand-holding? Many of us would appreciate the encouragement just now.

To begin with, both the first disciples, and we, are moving toward the end of Luke’s story of Jesus’ earthly ministry. In another couple of chapters, Jesus will be arrested and crucified. It will look for all the world as though everything is coming to an end—Jesus, his ministry, his teaching, his love.

What this passage addresses is how, as followers of Christ, are we to navigate such a world on our own. Jesus is taking the opportunity to help us understand how to live through such a volatile a world that often seems as if it is on fire—and it is not by going to be by burying our heads in the sand as we hope for a better day. No, Jesus appears to believe that we need to face things head-on.

And so, by outlining in broad strokes what will happen, Jesus is telling the people to live with readiness and awareness. Do not be distracted nor impressed by the surroundings—no matter how grand, or how dire. Instead, we need to acknowledge what is going on around us. We need to come to terms with our natural sense of denial, which is a common coping mechanism in we humans. It is not uncommon for us to scan the headlines and think to ourselves, “Nope, that’s not happening here,” and then believe that it never will.

Followers of Jesus are to realize that the tragedy, the evil, the persecution—all of this can happen here, where we are. Again, Jesus is not calling us into a state of paranoia, fear or hyper-vigilance. Instead, he is asking us to be honest; to realize that this world is churning under the weight of sin and despair. However, if we are able to be alert to all of this, we will not be surprised or have the rug pulled out from under our faith when we feel the effect of such things like this. Having been apprised of these things, we will not experience the kind of hopelessness and despair we will see all around us.

So, the second, and most important thing Jesus says to us is that all of this upheaval and mayhem must not cause us to wring our hands and agonize. Indeed, Jesus says a very curious thing to his disciples. He tells them, that all of this upheaval: *“This will give you an opportunity to testify.”*[13]

As one writer put it: “Jesus challenges us to remember that our struggles in this broken world are platforms.” That is: even—perhaps especially—in the midst of trouble we have an opportunity to show those without hope that despite our circumstances there is always a reason to hope. That instead of despair, we may find our mission and a purpose among God’s beloved people.

We may find that the gifts and the faith we have been given are just what is needed and wanted. In the midst of the fear and sorrow of the world, when everything seems to have been swept away, everything we thought was permanent, grand, impressive and immoveable—even a Temple for the Lord—we may find what we will still have is a faith and a mission.

Faith is still here because Christ is still here. The Temple has been destroyed, but we are still here, and now we—the followers of Christ—we are the house of God…and we are called to testify to that.

Let that sink in for a moment: *the Temple has been destroyed, and now we are the house of God…and we are called to testify to that.*

These are the words Christ means for us to embrace with all our hearts and minds, and our whole spirit.

Together, and in the company of the Holy Spirit, this is our directive: to celebrate that we are still here, and that the Spirit is still among and within us. From the assurance of these things we are meant to fashion our lives into a living testimony to the love of God, the grace of Christ, and the communion of the Spirit.

Moreover, just as the Temple was destroyed but the Spirit and the faith has continued on, we, too, should allow ourselves to wonder what it means for us and our future—the future of Nu’uanu Congregational Church—and how we will continue our mission of care and nurture of the community beyond our walls.

What is this going to require of us?

Once again, consider these words: *we, these people you see around you, we are the house of God.*

Notice the people around you, but also remember those who sat with us throughout the years but have gone on to be with God. Think about what their lives were like, and the testimony they still share with us through our memories of them.

Look out and see the beautiful grounds. In your mind’s eye, also see all parts of this campus, even the brand new garden beds that Becky has arranged for us. See all of this and now ask yourself: how shall we testify to God’s powerful goodness now? How shall we glorify God using this amazing gift? Remember, Jesus told the disciples that we should not worry about what we are going to say or do because he will give us the “*words and a wisdom*.” [15]

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church, what wisdom is God placing and growing in your heart about all of this?

Hold that thought and add to it Jesus’ promise that *“not a hair of your head will perish.* (and) *By your endurance you will gain your souls.* [18, 19] Which means that so long as we are truly listening to the Spirit, even when we “step out in faith,” even when we “take a leap of faith” to testify in ways that are daring and good, Christ’s presence and his sheltering love will be with us. We will not fail.

Thank you for participating in the experiential part of the sermon and keep looking around, it’s helpful. What I hope it did for us all is get us to imagine what is possible for us as a church—how we might come to be the church in the future—long past our own time here.

I hope we all, once again, gave ourselves the opportunity to look at our buildings and grounds in a way that reminded us all that they were built to glorify God by serving God’s beloved people. I hope we can see new possibilities for ourselves as we continue to be Christ’s church in the word.

Most of all, I hope what you experienced is the presence of Christ. We are still here, and so is his Holy Spirit. Together, let us continue to proclaim our faith, and that fact, to the whole world with strength, courage and gladness. Amen.