

## "The End"

**Proper 28, Year C - Luke 21:5-19**

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, November 17, 2013*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Every story has an ending, a final page, a last word trailing off into silence. The story may end with a "happily ever after." It may end with the hero riding off into the sunset on his faithful steed. My personal favorite is when the famous – or infamous – Wile E. Coyote, mangled and broken, having once again lost his quest to partake of fried, broiled or fricasseed Roadrunner, holds up that tattered little sign-on-a-stick that announces as clearly as can be – "The End." Like it or not, no matter what else happens, every story must, and *will*, end.

Scripture stubbornly insists that the story of creation itself *will* arrive at an ending. The whole great dance of things, we are told, will come to a stop. Sounds and stirrings in space will cease. Histories will terminate. The lights will go out. The curtain will be drawn. The whole show – will close down. All creation, including time itself, will simply cease to exist.

Scripture is equally clear that God will open another door after that closing, a door to another room for another magnificent dance. We talked about that new dance last week. But the the wonderful, splendid dance of *this* life, the only dance we *know* about – is headed for an End.

In the meantime, the end of the story is prefigured and rehearsed in countless other endings. Before the Coyote holds up his tattered little sign, he falls whistling into the cartoon canyon again and again. Before he holds up that sign, his Acme-aided plans go up in smoke over and over and over. Before the Coyote finally declares "The End," he is flattened by *dozens* of anvils. And just *like* that, the end of the world revisits us over and over. The final Crisis is felt in the tremblings of *every* crisis. Every ending in our lives rehearses *the* End.

Here as we approach the end of the Church year, with only next week's celebration of Christ the King between us and the first Sunday of a new year, the First Sunday of Advent, this morning's Gospel lesson records the *end* of Jesus' public ministry. Jesus stands at the temple entrance and points both to *the* End, and to *all* the endings until then. Our chunk of Luke's Gospel stops short of Jesus' words about the cosmic End – the sweep of his hand to the dying stars, his song of "the Son of Man coming in a cloud." You can pick up with verse twenty when you get home this afternoon. But *this* portion of his conversation gives us plenty to ponder about all the endings on the way to *the* End.

What gets Jesus started is somebody's innocent remark about the beauty of the temple. Some rubber-necking pilgrim, maybe on his or her first trip into Jerusalem from one of the outlying provinces, happens to walk within earshot of Jesus and his disciples. The on-looker oohs and aahs out loud at the splendor of the massive stones, at how wonderful it is that all of this has been done to the glory of God, and maybe starts up a chorus of "How Lovely Are Thy Dwellings." Jesus whirls around. "There won't be a stone left standing on stone;" he shouts at the hapless pilgrim, "all will be thrown down!" "The holiest ground you know," he tells him, "will tumble down around you." "Where you stand in awe today," he says, "will one day be ruins."

Now, from a purely *physical* level, Jesus didn't have to be a clairvoyant to make this prediction. After all, the *first* Temple, built by Solomon to replace a tent as the focal point of the People's relationship with God Almighty, was leveled as the leading citizens of Jerusalem were hauled away to Babylon. When the exiles finally returned to the Promised Land, they built another temple. But within three centuries, this so-called "Second Temple" had fallen victim to the pressures of advancing Hellenism. The beauty of the temple that Jesus and that pilgrim knew had only come into being in the generation before Jesus was born. And *Herod's* Temple barely survived Jesus' own life, before being torn to pieces at the end of Rome's tolerance with Jewish stubbornness. Jesus knew, even without the benefit

of divine foresight, that the Temple in Jerusalem was *doomed* to fall from the very minute the first foundation stone was laid.

But Jesus' words also speak to the broader truth that *every* temple we build is inevitably a doomed house. Every structure and system for housing the eternal will eventually wear out its usefulness. Every attempt to enclose the holy will ultimately disappoint and die. Name any temple you like, any altar built stone by stone in our heart, any ground that is sacred to us because at one time or another God has met us there. Maybe it's a church, or a neighborhood, or a denomination. Maybe it's a family, or a friendship, or a vocation. Maybe it's a passion, or a memory, or a dream. *All* of these have a finite lifespan. *All* of these, some way, some time, come to an end.

Our temples may die from the systematic attack of forces outside ourselves that are hateful or derisive or apathetic to whatever *we* have experienced as holy. They may die of natural causes, ceasing to exist as we move on to something else, or simply outgrow them. They may die because by our contempt or by our sloth or by our busy-ness we neglect them until they rot out from under us. Our temples may die because we weigh them down with impossible additions, trying to manage the mystery, trying to put the divine in our all-too-tiny box, turning the holy into the idolatrous.

In our own age the landscape is *littered* with such fallen temples. It seems sometimes that we feel the tremors and see the stones falling from every temple we know. The landscape is lit up with the burning ruins of governments, cities, families... churches. We have every reason to mourn such endings, the loss of things precious to us.

But sooner or later, part of what it means to mourn among the ruins is to see *every* ending in light of *the* End, to see each ending as a singular occasion for new faith. Our temples fall, afterall, so that *fresh* faith can rise. From the ruins of Solomon's Temple came Israel's reliance on prophetic hope. From the ruins of the Second Temple came a resurgence of devotion to the Law of the Lord. From the ruins of Herod's Temple, and the torn curtain of the Holy of Holies, came the Good News of God himself breaking into the human world in glory and in power and in love.

New, fresh faith springs from the ruins of fallen temples. But if we are to live with faithfulness through changing times, we must not only be aware of the *endings*, we must also be prepared for the new *beginnings*. It won't do if we insist that the new temple be built on the same blueprint as the last, and we consider anyone who thinks otherwise as subversive or \_\_\_\_\_ or evil, if we are so convinced that *we* have the design of the new temple, that we consider anyone who thinks otherwise as ignorant or benighted or too stupid to actually take part. It won't do if, like the Coyote, we drag ourselves from beneath that giant anvil, dust ourselves off, and prepare a new, even more elaborate plot, a new temple, weightier and more encumbered than the last.

In this morning's lesson, Jesus gives counsel to those whose temples lie in rubble at their feet. Jesus forbids naïveté, grabbing at whatever hand is offered in our time of need: "See that you are not misled," he says. And he forbids despair: "Do not be terrified," he warns. Instead he commends, and commands, simple trust: "I will give you words and a wisdom," And he give us our source of stubborn hope: "By your endurance you will be saved."

The only worthy worship, you see, is that which rises from the *ruins* of the temples we have built for ourselves in our hearts. Such calcified temples of brick and mortar must be broken down – to make room for billowing tents to welcome God's glory. Hearts of stone must be broken – to give way to hearts of living flesh, hearts as soft and supple as when we were baptized, hearts in which the Spirit of the living God can breathe and blow afresh into our lives. In that rebirth, in that renewal, in that *resurrection*, is the fullness of Christ's love, an ever new beginning of faith and hope – and trust – as we await with eager expectation the *final* End and the Glory of God *within* us.