

Text: Luke 21: 5-19
Title: When It All Falls Down
Date: 11.13.22
Roger Allen Nelson

On a bright winter's day, I went to Ground Zero.

It was the first January after that September and we lived a few hours up the Hudson River. From the train station we walked across the city – every block a multi-cultural-collage of class, commerce, and faith. There were bars and bodegas, synagogues and cathedrals, exotic smells and racing taxis. It was busy and noisy and alive and....

And as we got closer to the World Trade Center site the sidewalks were emptier, the space stiller, and my chest tighter. Maybe it was just entering a financial district, or maybe it was entering something holy.

Skyscrapers cast long overlapping shadows as we came on what looked like a construction or demolition site. Everything was fenced, trucks rumbled by, and debris blew and flew about. The neighborhood fire station – that lost fathers, brothers, sons – seemed both inauspicious and heartbreaking. Tourists were silently looking through openings in the fencing. Memorials, flowers, and fliers for the missing were plastered to street lights, walls, and benches. Nobody dared take them down.

There was a giant hole in the sky, nothing but sun – no shadow. The Hudson and the harbor were closer than I imagined. You could smell the water. It was bright and cold and harsh and holy and empty.

Everything falls down.
Eventually, everything falls down.

Paul Duke puts it this way:

Every story has an ending, a final page, a last word trailing off in silence. Scripture stubbornly insists that the story of creation itself will arrive at an ending. The whole great dance of things will come to a stop. Sounds and stirrings in space will cease. Histories will terminate. The lights will go out. The whole show will close down, the door will slam shut. God may open another door after that closing, a door to another room for another dance, but the only dance we know about is headed for an end.

In the meantime, that end is prefigured and rehearsed in countless other endings. Before the Apocalypse comes "apocalypse now," again and again. The end of the world revisits us over and over. Every crisis trembles with the final crisis. Every ending rehearses the end.

That's a grim word. Surely we didn't gather on this bright winter's day to be reminded that everything falls down. Surely there's a better word than that.

And yet....

As Jesus walked with his disciples across Jerusalem, they traversed the intersections of faith, commerce, and culture. Roman centurions were posted on the corners, the bars and bodegas of the Gentiles called-out for customers, and Jewish pilgrims were marching toward the temple.

In the middle of that big-city-bustle, Jesus saw a stooped widow slip in among the young-urban-professionals as they proudly brought their expensive gifts to the temple. Jesus noted that she gave out of her poverty and not out of her wealth. And, as he turned to see if his disciples noted the same thing. They were gawking at the temple....

But who could blame them? The temple was the center of their cultural-religious life.

The first temple was built by Solomon as God's figurative footstool on earth – where his glory resided. But that temple was destroyed by Babylonian terrorists. This second temple was built over a span of five hundred years. It was completed by Herod – an act of appeasement balancing oppression and governance – but in the heart of the Empire there stood a Hebrew temple! It was a symbol of God's blessing and their belonging.

So, maybe Jesus paused, lost in thought for a moment, and then with their full attention, spoke gently and deliberately:

As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another, every one of them will be thrown down.

And with that, Jesus launched into a discourse about the destruction of the temple and a coming tumult. The language is dark and overwrought. Some hear prophecy that the temple will be nothing but rubble in less than 40 years – when it will be leveled by the Romans. And, some hear in the words of Jesus something more dramatic and final,
the end of the dance,
the close of the door,
the great apocalypse.

Eventually, everything falls down.

What can we hear in this warning of Jesus?

Try this....

Soon after September 11, Nancy Gibbs wrote,

If you want to humble an empire it makes sense to maim its cathedrals. They are symbols of its faith, and when they crumple and burn, it tells us we are not so powerful and we can't be safe.

After our cathedrals fell on that September morning people flocked to churches. In Schenectady, New York we opened the doors every day at noon for the reading of scripture, music, and prayer. We left the sanctuary open for those who just wanted to sit in the silence.

On the Sundays that followed, our worship services were full, the old wooden pews packed, and even the balcony was crowded. People, I only knew as names in the directory, came to worship. People, who had barely darkened the door before, fidgeted, fumbled, and found their place among the habitual.

Galvanized by grief, fear, and the longing for something that wouldn't fall down, people gathered together. They clung to the hope that there was something more – some love, some mercy, some God. Shook to the core they longed for evidence that there was something unshakeable.

Dear friends, what's remarkable about this text is that Jesus doesn't promise his disciples comfort, protection, or success. Rather, he promises just the opposite; he promises trouble, turmoil, and terror.

He doesn't say that things won't shake. He doesn't say that life will be abundant with blessing. He doesn't say that they should prepare defenses, hoard resources, hunker down and wait for heaven. He says that it will all fall down.

I've wondered if it's significant that Jesus says the temple will fall. It's not courthouses, capitals, and castles that he points to. He doesn't say that financial centers or political systems will fall. He says that the temple will come-a-tumbling-down...

Maybe there is here the reminder that even our constructions of faith are flawed, fallible, and bound to fall. Maybe there's the reminder that when it all comes down, religion comes down too.

Listen again to Paul Duke:

Every temple is a doomed house. Every structure and every system for housing the holy will wear out its use, will disappoint and die. Name any temple you like, any ground that is sacred to us because at one time or another God met us there: a church, a denomination, neighborhood, family, friendship, vocation, memory or dream ~ they all have a life span and they all come to an end. They may die of natural causes, ceasing to exist as we who inhabit them die or move on. Or they may die by the violent assault of forces that are hateful to what we experience as holy. But most often our temples fall because we neglect them until they rot, or because we weigh them down with impossible idolatrous additions. In the beginning the temple is a tent, simple and supple with room for the Spirit to billow through. But sooner or later we try to manage the mystery. The thing calcifies, thickens, encrusts, fills up with bad furniture, builds itself to an unwarranted weight until it has to fall.

Yikes!

Again, what a grim word.
Where's the hope?
Where's the gospel?

There's clearly a darkness to this warning of Jesus. And Luke probably wrote this gospel in 80 AD – after the destruction of the temple and in the midst of persecution. So, this text is descriptive of what the early church was experiencing and intended to encourage them to remain faithful.

Therefore, I think the flipside of this warning is not what falls but what stands. When all hell breaks loose, when nations rise-up against nations, kingdoms against kingdoms, and when there are droughts, pandemics, insurrections, floods, and persecution, when everything falls down – what remains?

I don't mean to be maudlin or melodramatic about getting hit by a car last year. Many of you face and have faced struggles that are more difficult. Many of you know darkness that can overwhelm light. But, a couple weeks into my hospital stay, I had a moment of peace about dying. I thought my life was a gift – with more goodness than I'd ever imagined – and it was okay to die. It could all fall down and I wasn't afraid. God would still have hold of me.

Mind you, I wanted to live for my family and for whatever I can still do in this world, but I was at peace with dying. And while it wasn't a particularly spiritual moment....

That peace was not in what I'd done, what I'd believed, or what I'd built; that peace, that comfort, was in belonging....

body and soul, in life and in death to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. Who has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head...

Dear friends, denominations will break apart, no matter how exceptional – empires will fall, and persecution may come, even religious practices may fail, but you belong to God in Christ and that's unshakable. That's eternal. We will weather grim days and an ending will come, but God holds you and has the last word. After the dark there is the dawning of the day of the Lord.

May that gospel seep into our bones, encourage our spirits, and enable us to stand no matter what falls down around us.

Amen.