

“Not one stone will be left upon another.”

Luke 21:5-19

Lake Shore Baptist Church

November 17, 2019

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Have you ever felt like you're about to reach a tipping point? Usually, we don't know that we've reached a tipping point until we've gone over the point of tipping. You know what it's like to tump over in a canoe, right? You don't realize you have reached the moment of no return until you are in the water. Our lectionary reading this morning is about the tipping point. A tipping point for Jesus and his followers. A tipping point for Israel.

Before we move into the text, I want to take a point of privilege and give a shout-out to Richard Groves, your pastor some forty years ago. While I've never been a member of Lake Shore, this community, unbeknownst to you, has been a part of my spiritual journey. Forty years ago, when I was a journeyman missionary living in Kenya and as the Southern Baptist Holy War was just starting, I received every week in the mail Richard's sermons mailed to me by my brother Burt. Those sermons from this pulpit brought light to a 22-year old living in a Nairobi slum and trying to make sense of what it meant to be a Baptist. So, it is an honor to stand in this pulpit. Thank you for inviting me.

As we come to the end of the church year and before we move into the season of Advent—and the renewal of the year from the angle of things that Christians worldwide will reflect on, it's good to take a reckoning of where we are. The readings today invite us to do that—to take a reckoning; perhaps a clear-eyed and sober reckoning. The readings (one utopian and one dystopian) address the issue of collective loss, collective defeat, national catastrophe, the destruction of the highest goods of a nation, and, in a real sense, the threat of the erasure of a people. The context of Isaiah 65 is the aftermath of Israel's destruction by Babylon; Israel without Solomon's temple, the holy of holies, the ark of the covenant. Gone. Lost forever. Yet that destruction was not the end of the story for the Jews.

In the Lukan drama we are drawn into Jesus's final encounter with the temple—placed in the narrative shortly before his execution. Matthew, Mark, and Luke record Jesus entering Jerusalem in an orchestrated and public way and then going directly to the Temple where he engages in civil disobedience that threatens the Sadducean oligarchy—allied, as it was, with the empire of Rome. The result was predictable. But before his arrest, Luke (and Matthew and Mark) say that Jesus is now back in the temple where he is teaching.

“When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, [Jesus] said, ‘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.’”

(A footnote here—the writer of Luke had 20/20 hindsight—writing about a decade after Jerusalem had fallen to Rome. The temple referred to in Luke’s gospel had been destroyed at the time Luke was written. End of footnote.)

As you know, Jesus’ words about the destruction of the temple in Luke 21, follows his action recorded in Luke 19 where he enters the temple—declares it a den of gangsters and drives out the cashiers. To make this political point more obvious, Matthew and Mark provide the interwoven story of Jesus cursing the fig tree (to then see the tree wither and die). Their point is that Jesus condemns the temple like he condemns the fig tree. Both—the temple and the fig tree— are, subsequently, destroyed. NT scholar Marcus Borg has argued that Jesus’ words and actions were like that of someone going into an Army recruiting office during the Vietnam War and burning his draft card. This was not a “cleansing of the temple,” as sometimes labeled, but rather a “symbolic destruction” of the temple. Like Rosa Park’s refusal to give up her seat on a bus, like Mahatma Gandhi’s march to the sea, a reaction from the authorities was guaranteed.

If we want, we can explore the words and actions of Jesus regarding the fall of Israel in the first century as analogous to what’s going on in America today. In fact, it seems to me that the lectionary reading invites us, begs us, coerces us to make inferences, and, perhaps, it also provides guidance for us in 2019.

Now last time I looked Lake Shore is still a Baptist church. I say still because you are no longer Southern Baptists and no longer affiliated with the BGCT. You have taken important stands in this regard. Now, some of you in the room were once Southern Baptists. (I won’t ask for a show of hands.) And, today the leadership and laity in many Baptist circles have taken a Sadducean approach to the American situation and forged an alliance with the political powers so that they can advance their religious agenda; an agenda that you largely reject. Like the Sadducees of the first century whose High Priest controlled the temple—the evangelicals of America have made a deal with those at the levers of power. Like the Sadducees who are getting something from Rome, the evangelical priorities are being leveraged in ways that demand that we take stands. Maybe stands like Lake Shore has taken . . . in the Temple.

Dare we imagine that the twenty-first century American church like the first century children of Israel (the Chosen Ones, the Kingdom of Priest, the Holy Nation) might experience **“the days . . . when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”** Perhaps as for first century Jews, such imaginations might seem unspeakable or blasphemous or just down right crazy. But are they? What if the demise of the American church is possible? Are there signs

around us that suggest it is even likely? And so, we, like Jesus' followers, ask: **'Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?'**

When Jesus' followers ask him about this tipping point, Jesus admits that he doesn't know the answer to that question. And, I suppose, neither do we.

But, Jesus says, in this moment—when all around you there is chaos, when all around you there are wars and insurrections **"do not be terrified . . ."** Of course, Americans are generally not terrified of war. We've been at war now for nearly 20 years in Afghanistan. If you're 18 years old or younger, you've not lived in an America not at war. While, being a part of an empire, we may not fear war, many of us have fear and anxiety about the state of things. Some have turned off the news. Insurrection in the form of alternative narratives, alternative facts, bending of the norms, breaking of the norms, the encouragement of lawless behavior. We are not in Kansas anymore. **"When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified . . ."** Jesus advises us not to be afraid. While our first instinct may be panic, flight, retreat, hibernation, it may be that our faith demands something else from us.

Of course, for Jesus and his followers it gets worse. Perhaps so for us. **"They will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to . . . prisons, you will be brought before . . . governors because of my name."** The way of Jesus is costly; this is not cheap. Are these words relevant for us in Waco, Texas? The Lebanese Christian poet Khalil Gibran says, **"I go—as others already crucified have gone. And think not we are weary of crucifixion. For we must be crucified by larger and yet larger men, between greater earths and greater heavens."** And so we are invited to take up our cross and follow. And why do we do it? Jesus says—admits the chaos, the war, the insurrections, the injustice, the violence— **"This will give you an opportunity to testify."** He calls on us—you and me—to bear witness. To stand still without fear while the world revolves and devolves into insanity and bear witness, testify. Lake Shore joins those who are doing this now. We are called now and in the immediate the days ahead of us to join the ranks of those who played this role before. I don't suppose that will be easy. And, I'm not sure what the cost will be?

Jesus says to his followers: **"You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; . . . You will be hated . . ."**

Strong words. But not really that hard to imagine? Perhaps not since the Civil War in America have we seen families and friends as divided. Some of your Baptist brothers and sisters are not happy with Lake Shore. While I'm not suggesting that those of us in this sanctuary this morning are immune to our own partisan blindness or to the human proclivity to tribalism, I've talked to enough of you to know of your grief and sadness about the state of things. And, I know of your thirst for justice, your determination, your resolve to stand up in this moment. Your words and

deeds have put some of you into situations that are not comfortable to say the least. What will the Thanksgiving dinner be like for those of you sharing that with a group of friends and family? Perhaps we are forced to compartmentalize in order to get through that celebration in a hospitable way. (Hopefully someone spikes the punch. On second thought.) I've lost some good friends recently; some of you have lost some as well. Some among us are avoiding some close family members. This is where we are. This is where we are now.

Our scripture reading this morning we recognize is a call into this moment of dis-ease. How we move into this moment in which we may **be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends**" is fraught with moral and professional and civil ambiguities and complexities. We, of course, recognize how careful we must walk. But we know we are being called.

Note that Jesus' challenge to his followers also comes with assurance. As his followers' face with courage the challenge of the erosion of the stones that seem impermeable and fixed, he says to them: **"I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand . . ."** Our testimony, our witness must be wise. It must be. While we may not know ahead of time what we will say or how we will say it, the Logos will be with us. And, this is not an untested protocol. We have recent examples of Baptists like Martin Luther King, Jr, Howard Thurman, Will Campbell, Walter Rauschenbusch, and Muriel Lester—who testified knowing full well that they could lose relationships, that they might even face threats to their well-being. We have the recent examples of Christians from other fields, denominational cousins, like Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Maximilian Kolbe. And, of course, we have allies in other religious traditions—like Mahatma Gandhi, Tich Nhat Hahn, the Dalai Lama—who face empires and speak truth to power; their words transcending their particularities. The words, the wisdom is eternal. While the stones may be thrown down . . . the Logos will remain. So, this protocol has been tested. **"I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand . . ."**

In our time of reckoning—at the end of this church calendar year—and during this season of chaos and confusion in our national life—our Scripture provides realistic sobriety and strong assurance to each of us as individuals. Like Jesus, we cannot know exactly where the tipping point is. Perhaps we have already passed it. Regardless, we stand at the ready without fear to walk steadfastly into this moment with the knowledge that the wisdom of Jesus will shine on us, in us, and through us. Lake Shore Baptist Church, I am grateful to you, for who you have been, who you are, and who you will be in these days. This is your time.

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you O God this day. Amen.