

<Isaiah 65:17-25; Psalm 98:1-9; Luke 21:5-19>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

What I’m about to say may reflect a reality that some of you listening to this have already recognized and even accepted, but I am reaching the stage in life wherein I realize that what I have known and seen for much of my life may not always be there. Personally, I see this in lots of different, little ways: the pine tree next to my parents house, which was originally a small, three-foot Christmas tree in my grandma’s apartment, is now a tree so tall that its height may not be sustainable. Or walking around the grounds of Camp Duffield, and seeing that a bluff overlooking the creek is no longer really there due to erosion and the changing landscape. Recently, I caught up with someone I graduated college with, who now works for the college in the career and vocational offices. As we were reminiscing about our years on campus, she informed me that a dorm building I lived in for two years was no longer there at all, but had been torn down for a new development and green space. There are occasions in our lives when the impermanence of our world, whether human-made or environmental, is very present. This is not a new experience to us, though it always feels new and unique to each of us.

We see such a dynamic at play with the disciples, as well. Walking around Jerusalem, they see the stones and the walls of the Temple, and they are impressed. There is a very real possibility that the disciples have watched and heard news of the Temple’s development and building; it took nearly thirty years to complete! If they had traveled to Jerusalem as children with their parents, they likely would have seen the progress of construction and marveled at the ways in which it was put together. And now, in Jerusalem with Jesus, who has spoken and taught them of what is to come, they still cannot help but be impressed with what they see. And as one who has walked some of those same streets, and seen the walls and buildings there, I can relate.

But very quickly Jesus steps in with a change in the disciples’ focus, calling their attention to the reality that one day it will all be no more. “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.”

It’s enough to make the disciples ask, perhaps even with incredulity and a tinge of panic, “when?” And, “what will be the signs?” Likely, it would elicit a similar response from us, ‘when will these things happen, and how will we know?’

Humans are creatures which gravitate toward the promise of security and stability. This is not a new statement for us; we have talked about it before, and we know it from our own lives. The efforts we humans go through to try and secure such stability and future are myriad, and even these are eclipsed by the number of products and programs these days which try to offer us the promise of what we yearn for. It feels like not a week goes by when I am not getting an email offer to do a “health check” on my retirement, or to

make sure my or my loved ones' affairs are in order, or to ask my doctor about any given drug which I might very well be allergic to but should inquire about anyway. We yearn for the realization of security and stability, and when that seems out of reach, we become anxious and more than anxious. Perhaps the better question than, "when will these things happen?" is "what can I do, instead? What can we do and offer in response to uncertainty and anxiety? What do we have before us to take their place?"

In response to the disciples' questions for a timeline and signs to look for, in response to their uncertainty and anxiety, Jesus instead doubles-down to tell them what they can expect to experience as disciples, and it isn't comforting. Wars and famine, conflict and illness, earthquake and flood...and before that, even, arrest and persecution, division and disconnection.

Not what we want to hear as we welcome new members - aren't you glad you joined the church! Not what we want to imagine as we approach Thanksgiving, and Advent, and the Christmas season, some of the brightest and most joy-filled times in our years. But while Jesus does not sugar-coat the realities of life and discipleship, he does not leave us in such a state, either; along with an honest appraisal of the situation are two promises of hope and comfort; the first is direct, and the second is indirect, a reminder of what has already been promised.

For the first promise, we are invited to look at the last line of Jesus' teaching in this reading, "By your endurance you will gain your souls." Many of us, myself included, are drawn toward the call to endurance, and are initially willing place the action on that - we must endure, we must gather our energy and fortitude, girding our loins and bolstering our spirits to endure whatever may come. But "endurance" is not the active verb in this sentence. Instead, that honor falls on the word "gain."

There is a difference in mindset when we shift our attention and focus away from the word "endurance" to the word "gain." Whereas "endurance" elicits thoughts of struggle and striving, of making it through an ordeal and using all available strength to hold on as long as possible, the word "gain" reminds us of the promise that is to be realized, the goal that is to be accomplished. Whereas "endurance" leads us to think an effort is only of our own capability, "gain" reminds us that what we hope for is waiting for us, and it thus becomes the motivation and strength to endure in the first place. The two concepts are not unrelated, but it is important to remember which one makes possible the other one. And the goal, the hope to be gained is what keeps us going, and able to endure when necessary.

For instance, Ernest Shackleton, known for his Antarctic expeditions - four of them, in fact, named his ship *Endurance* - not because of its strength or physical capabilities. In fact, the *Endurance* ultimately became stuck in the ice and eventually broke apart well before Shackleton ever reached his goal. Rather, the ship was so named because it represented what Shackleton was able to commit to based on what he hoped to gain - the experience of exploration, of finding a new way, and of seeing knowledge of the world increased and shared. It was that same hope which motivated and made possible

all of Shackleton’s expeditions to the Antarctic and elsewhere, the promise of something more to be gained.

Such is the first promise of Jesus to the disciples, and even still to us: there is something more to be gained, something greater even than security or stability, and that is our souls. This is the first promise, but to truly understand that we need to hold it in conversation with the second, indirect promise: that which is represented by our souls. Because while that encompasses our personhood, it, too, is more than that alone. For that, we need to return to the vision of Isaiah to the people of God.

Isaiah, as we know, is speaking to the people of what is to come, in terms of what they must endure as they are called upon to return to right relationship with God, but also of what they will gain as they do so. In God’s own words, it will be the creation of the new heaven and the new earth, characterized by peace and calm, by lives lived to their fullest extent without undue turmoil, by the realization of things planted and worked for, by the hopes of the people brought to fruition. There on God’s Holy Mountain, the gaining of God’s Kingdom will be comprehensive and complete. There, on God’s Holy Mountain, people will know and be known, fully and completely, for who they are; their souls will be filled, and cleansed of worry or anxiety, fear or insecurity.

This is what the people will gain, and this is the on-going promise not just through the prophet Isaiah but through our Lord, as well, the one who is able to promise security and life in the fullness of discipleship. The promise of this is what drives us and gives us hope, in the first place. It’s what allows us to dream and imagine, creatively and anew, what God is doing and how we might follow along.

Ernest Shackleton didn’t focus merely on the enduring to make his expeditions; he was driven and energized by what would be gained. What drives you? What drives this church?

The promise of the realization of the Kingdom of God enables us to endure the realities of this world and its empty promises, all while we envision what can be and what will be. New members, aren’t you glad you joined!

We maintain our focus on what is to be gained so that we have the ability to endure. What is it that we gain? Nothing short of the fullness of our souls in the Kingdom of God, beyond even our wildest imaginations. But let us dream, and let us envision God’s Kingdom and live it out for the hope and promise of us all. Let us gain what has been promised. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*