

“Terrible Ungluing”<sup>1</sup>

Luke 21:5-19

Collegiate Presbyterian Church

November 14, 2010

Introduction to Reading

A mother cat was out on a stroll with her three small kittens.

They are all enjoying the walk

when suddenly the mother cat sees a huge, ferocious dog  
coming toward them in the distance.

She quickly gathers her three small kittens,

tucks them under a nearby porch  
where they will be safe from the dog.

Then she turns and approaches the dog.

They walk slowly toward each other

until finally they are almost nose to nose.

The mother cat looks straight into the dog’s eyes

and goes, “Ruff! Ruff! Ruff!”

With that the dog turns and runs away.

The mother cat then returns to her kittens,

crawls under the porch,  
looks them in the eyes and says,

“Now I am going to explain to you why  
I insist you learn a second language.”<sup>2</sup>

Many of us have learned a second language,

whether it be Spanish or French

or for those who are REALLY fortunate, Hebrew or Greek.

Well, it’s not too much of a stretch to say

the Bible teaches us a second language –  
the language of the reign of God.

It is a way of speaking which when studied and used

will in time hopefully lead to a new way  
of seeing and hearing,  
of thinking and behaving.

This morning’s reading is comes from

a particular part of that second language –

it’s called apocalyptic... and it’s all about revealing

how the ultimate purposes of God are being worked out  
in the events of this world.

---

<sup>1</sup> The title of an reflection on this text by Walter Brueggemann in *Christian Century*, October 21, 1992, p. 931

<sup>2</sup> This story is from a sermon “Learning a New Language” by Daniel P. Matthews, published in *Lectionary Homiletics*.

## Luke 21:5-19

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he 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." They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them. "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. "But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.

### Sermon

I suppose you are wondering why I am wearing a hardhat.  
Well, if you must know, it's because I happen to BELIEVE Jesus  
when he says: "not one stone will be left on another;  
all will be thrown down."

The truth is that earlier this week  
parts of the ceiling just above the communion table began to fall.  
In fact, it happened twice this week –  
baseball-size chunks of one-hundred year old plaster  
came crashing down on our communion table.  
The first time we figured it was just a fluke and cleaned it up.  
The second time we thought,  
"Well, maybe we need to call in the trustees,"  
and moved the table.

And just in case there's a third time... well, I want to be ready.

As Luke sets this scene,  
Jesus is with a group of people in the Temple in Jerusalem.  
By all accounts, it is a magnificent structure,  
both in size and in beauty.  
One ancient observer reports  
that the front wall around the entrance was overlaid with gold,  
so that at certain times of the day  
the reflection of the sun was blinding.  
The walls were white marble...  
there were porches lined with columns

topped with ornate capitals...  
great marble tables stood ready for the sacrifice.  
The central shrine itself was more than 100 feet high;  
which in that day was an awe-inspiring height.

Well, everybody's "oohing and ahing"  
when some rubbernecked pilgrim" blurts out  
how beautiful all the stones and memorial gifts are...  
and as all heads nod in amazed agreement  
Jesus whirls around to proclaim:  
"As far as these things you see now,  
the days will come when not one stone will be left on another;  
all will be thrown down."  
THE most beautiful building you have ever seen...  
THE holiest ground you have ever known...  
the place where you have met God  
for the last thousand years,  
THAT place will crumble around you.  
So, take a good, long look,  
because where you stand in awe today will one day be ruins.<sup>3</sup>

You may remember that what's still left of this Temple today  
is a portion of what is known as  
the "Western Wall" or "Wailing Wall."  
The stones that you can actually see are huge;  
weighing anywhere from two to eight tons.  
And archaeologists tell us there's this one extraordinary stone  
that weighs almost 600 tons.  
So maybe you can understand why folks  
had a hard time believing Jesus prediction  
that all this would be thrown down.  
They couldn't imagine that such a magnificent structure  
could ever be torn down.  
But of course, it had been... twice before...  
and in a short forty years  
it would be leveled again by the Romans.  
And since Luke wrote his Gospel  
AFTER the third destruction of the Temple,  
he is very concerned for those whose faith has been crushed  
along with the stones,  
those who still couldn't accept that this was possible.  
And reading between the lines,  
Luke is also concerned that folks  
might see the destruction of the Temple

---

<sup>3</sup> Paul D. Duke in "Ruined Temples," *Christian Century*, November 1, 1995, p. 1011

as a sign of the end of the world.

So he recounts for them Jesus words that day:

“Beware that you are not led astray...  
many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’  
and ‘The time is near!’

Do not go after them.

And when you hear of wars and insurrections,  
do not be terrified; for these things are taking place...  
and will continue to take place...  
but the end will not follow immediately.”  
The end will not follow immediately.

Almost a decade has passed since September 11, 2001,  
but that event remains fresh in countless memories.

Soon after we watched the World Trade Center fall,  
I was asked by a half-joking, agnostic friend if I thought  
this was a sign that the end of the world was near.

I said absolutely not,  
but I also found that within hours of the Twin Towers collapse,  
I started thinking about “endings” –  
the end of our nation’s feeling of invulnerability...  
the end of our fantasy that everyone in the world  
sees us as we see ourselves...  
the end of the world as we had known it...  
I said those words in my sermon the next Sunday.

And with all of these “endings”  
I experienced an anxiety and fear that I had never felt before.  
The horror of 9/11 did not signal the end of the world,  
but so, so many things crumbled that day.

In the past forty or fifty years  
we have seen a steep and steady membership decline  
in churches like ours.

The 1950’s was such a heady time  
when churches were full and multiplying.

Who could have imagined  
Presbyterians would lose a third of our members  
by the turn of the century?

Who knew we’d spend decades in arguing over  
who can be ordained and who can marry?

Who would’ve dreamed such an influential church  
could be so quickly pushed to the margins  
of civic and family life?

It’s not the end of the world...  
not even the end of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.,

but much has crumbled.

Fifty years ago,  
    one of the most respected temples in our culture  
    was the American family;  
which usually meant a mom and dad and two or three kids.  
Dad worked out in the world  
    and mom worked in the home.  
They were home most nights...  
    they ate meals together...  
    they went to Sunday school and church most Sundays...  
    and took a drive together on Sunday afternoons.

THAT family is almost impossible to find today.  
An article in last week's Register reminded us that  
    40% of children in this country are born outside of marriage;  
    the percentage being much higher in some communities.  
Churches like CPC try to adjust our programs to include  
    divorcees, single parents, and blended families.  
We want to be open to same sex partners and same sex parents.  
We understand that Sunday swim meets  
    and soccer games and family trips are here to stay.  
Depending on whom you listen to,  
    the family is either in grave danger of disintegrating  
    or it is simply just changing... becoming different.  
Either way the old temple of the American family  
    is being radically transformed  
    and there is a fair amount of fear and trepidation  
    about what the future holds.

Finally, it's not hyperbole that the past three years  
    have seen the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.  
Our investments and homes are worth a lot less...  
    thousands have lost everything...  
    unemployment is at a level we haven't seen in three decades...  
which means (among other things)  
    that these young people who sit with us in our pews...  
    who have enormous contributions to make as  
    scientists and teachers and engineers...  
these may struggle mightily to begin a career  
    or even to find work  
It's not the end of the world,  
    but to those who are graduating in a few months  
    it may feel like it.

The truth is that every temple,

every structure,  
every system,  
every human institution  
    will ultimately fail us, disappoint us, and die.  
ALL will come to an end...  
and in the face of this reality,  
    Jesus would remind us that this is not the end of the world.

Now, I don't know  
    how sensitive and pastoral he was  
    when he first delivered this news,  
but I repeat – Jesus says our earthly endings  
    do not signal the end of the world.  
What they DO is give us a chance to testify...  
    to bear witness to our faith...  
        to serve God in ever-new and changing ways.<sup>4</sup>

Here's what Jesus says:  
Beware that you are not misled."  
    In other words, don't be naïve."  
"Do not be terrified..."  
    In other words, do not despair... do not fear.  
He says, "I will give you words and wisdom..."  
    In other words, trust me to provide for you.  
And, "By your endurance you will gain your souls."  
    By your patient, tenacious hope,  
        you will come to know my life.

Do not be naïve.  
Do not fear  
    Trust me.  
        Persevere

I remember hearing  
    our Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, Gradye Parsons,  
say that his all-time favorite Bible story  
    is the story in Luke 8 —  
    Jesus is asleep in the boat with his disciples  
        when a storm comes up.  
The disciples start freaking out  
    and when Jesus wakes up and sees what's happening he asks,  
    'Where is your faith?'  
Well, the middle of the lake is a pretty scary place.  
    it's dark and stormy and you can't see the other shore,  
which led Gradye to create a mantra he regularly recites to himself.  
    It is: "Get in the boat; go across the lake;  
        there will be storm; you will not die."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Paul D. Duke in "Ruined Temples," *Christian Century*, November 1, 1995, p. 1011

There seems to be a terrible ungluing going on in our time.  
Things just seem to be coming apart all around us –  
    in politics and the economy...  
    the threat of terrorism and climate change.  
    natural disasters that seem to punish  
        those who can least afford it..  
    marriages and families... our bodies.  
Things just seems to be a coming apart.  
The good news I have for you today, my friends,  
    is that Jesus knows all about this.  
He knows about the fake messiahs,  
    the wars and insurrections,  
    the earthquakes and the famines.  
He knows about being arrested and dragged into court,  
    about being betrayed by those closest to him,  
he knows about trusting his father with his very life,  
    he knows about persevering even unto death.  
Jesus knows the ungluing of everything around him...  
    and yet he says this is not the end.  
        It is the time to wait patiently... to persevere... and to testify.

Most of you know the story of Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer.  
He was a leader if the Confessing Church movement in Germany  
    that opposed the Third Reich.  
Because of his involvement in a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler,  
    he was imprisoned and eventually hanged.  
He knew it was coming...  
    he could see the handwriting on the wall,  
Yet, he also knew that even the devastation  
    being wrought by Hitler's madness  
        was not the end of the world.  
So, with his life and work crumbling around him,  
    Bonhoeffer trusts God...  
    and this trust gave birth to a hymn  
a hymn which continues to reassure us that the end is not yet...  
    and that among the crumbling temples of our time,  
        God is faithful still.

Bonhoeffer wrote:  
    By gracious powers so wonderfully sheltered,  
    and confidently waiting come what may,  
    we know that God is with us night and morning

---

<sup>5</sup> Though repeated many times, I first heard this at the annual meeting of the Covenant Network in either 2008 or 2009

And never fails to greet us each new day.<sup>6</sup>  
God is with us night and morning  
And never fails to greet us each new day. Amen.

---

<sup>6</sup> Translated by Fred Pratt Green, "By Gracious Powers," *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, (Louisville: WJK, 1990), #342.