

Turning Over Stones
Bob Stillerman
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
Luke 21:5-19
11-17-2019

King Solomon built a grand, beautiful temple. After the exile, a second temple was built. It wasn't quite as impressive, but it was still substantial. And some years later, Herod made it sparkle. Solomon would have been proud. And this place was a symbol of God's presence. Even today you can stand next to its foundation. Its stones are massive, the height of two or three people. And one can only imagine the enormity of the columns, walls, and roof it once supported. The temple represented God's longevity, consistency, and permanence. It had been there. And it was gonna keep on being there.

Of course, this grand building was also the very center of Jewish life: an economic engine; a political seat; a religious shrine; a marketplace; a consortium of ideas; a melting pot and homecoming space of the diaspora. The temple's existence, and the culture it provided seemed as permanent, and as necessary to the life and vitality of its people as air and food and water.

But what happens when there's no longer a temple?

The author of Luke's gospel writes in the future, some fifty years after the death of Jesus, and approximately ten-fifteen years after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple.

Now I know we modern, educated, scientific, progressive, intellectual, well-read people may turn our noses up at texts like these, with their apocalyptic, end-times language. We say we shouldn't spend SO MUCH energy obsessing about the exact date or exact time that God's world is gonna fuse into the present, and everything's gonna be changed. We say it's more prudent to be practical, to be pragmatic, to be patient. All this urgency is silly. Stop imagining some cosmic event akin to the most audacious Hollywood movie – a gigantic Stay Puff Marshmallow man toppling Manhattan, or meteorites crashing into the Great Wall of China, or muscular, foaming-mouthed beasts and winged creatures

wreaking havoc. The end isn't going to be dramatic; it's gonna be something subtle; something we can process.

How lucky we are to speak from a perspective of privilege.

Luke's community believed the end was coming, because everything they had ever known was coming to an end. Jerusalem was no more. The temple was no more. Their identity was no more. Their culture was no more. Perhaps it would be equivalent to the events in modern-day Syria? Would anyone here reasonably believe that in a matter of a decade a nation could be so decimated, so scattered, so imperiled? And that a world full of people claiming to be righteous and good and forward-thinking could be so unmoved by such a shift?

Luke's community wrestles with how to move forward in a world that's not like anything they've ever known. And they wonder what God's future is gonna hold.

Once, there was a faithful temple. Its priests were not political. Its revenues supported the vulnerable. Its rituals were not hypocritical, but rather reflected an investment in God and neighbor.

Unfortunately, the patronage system infected the temple, weakening it with corruption, and secularism, and greed. Eventually the infighting became something the Roman empire was no longer willing to tolerate. And God's tangible, centuries-old representation was no longer present.

So surely, God's about to set things right, right now. Right?!?

There's a temptation to make the temple's demise (whether it's in the first century or the current century) the beginning of the end. The disciples, in the company of Jesus, cannot imagine a day when the temple will no longer stand. And they are impressed, not by the love and spirit of the God it's intended to represent, but rather by its grandeur. Jesus says, "One day, none of this is gonna be here. It's all gonna be rubble."

The disciples, those in the story, and those listening fifty years later, and those of us today, are tempted to cling to the physical destruction of the temple. Jesus, I think, is speaking in a more metaphorical sense. The temple, the very system that

was intended to serve and honor God, can no longer stand, because serving God is offensive to its standing. Jesus, proclaiming truth, calling out hypocrisy, loving ALL neighbors, ignoring status, reading Torah, and actually obeying Torah, is an affront to the vitality of the temple's status in Rome's status quo. And such an institution cannot stand.

Will Campbell famously pondered what would happen if God's Kingdom really did come to the mainline churches of downtown Nashville. How shocking, how disruptive, how stone-turning would it be for the city's prostitutes, addicts, con-artists, and homeless to fill the pews of prosperous Protestant congregations? How disruptive would it be for an itinerant prophet, a fellow who did odd jobs, and not the kind they post on Thumbtack, to share the pulpits of PhDs? And what, I wonder, would happen if churches became sanctuaries: for immigrants seeking freedom from harm; for thinkers seeking freedom of conscience; for neighbors seeking freedom from economic manipulation; for ministers seeking freedom from political influence; for humanity seeking release from the captivity of the status quo? I dare say, not one stone would be left unturned.

I suppose I'm more traditional. I love institutions, especially the church and Church. I believe in the church's ability to be a transformative, illuminative force for God's goodness. But I'm also fairly realistic. The institutional church is not something that can or will last ad infinitum. Only God is infinite. Even the best institutions are finite.

We live in an age where, tragically, the institutional church, for all its good, has also done great harm, some of that intentionally, and some of that unintentionally. There has been silence and indifference in response to humanitarian crises, to climate crises, to scandals involving abuse and corruption, and on a micro-level, deep woundedness generated in individuals who have been battered by language, policies, and liturgies not in keeping with the One whom we claim to follow. Not to mention, a culture that has repeatedly excluded, demoralized, subordinated, and marginalized people because of their gender, race, sexuality, income, or other demographic.

And this reality can be overwhelming. If the institutions that we believe in are broken, how can the world we know, the world we believe in continue to exist? And how can the God we proclaim to follow be present?

Surely, such things are a signal, right? Surely, this just ushers in a new age. Once the system gets so broken, God's gonna wipe Her hands of it all, queue the supernatural events, settle all the accounts, and usher in something better, something purer, something more in keeping with God. Right?!?

Okay, I know I am sort of rambling here, so I'll get to my point. I think on some level, it was easier for Luke's community to believe the end was coming quickly, and that lent them a sense of urgency, and a sense of endurance. And I think Luke's author is responding to the impulse of his/her community to simply wait for the final crescendo.

And I think we'd do well to listen to that response. Because I'm not interested in throwing up my hands, and waiting for the world to end. I think our church can persevere. And I think our world can persevere. And I think God's love can persevere. In us!

"Okay Jesus," the disciples say, "So the temple's gonna fall, and the world's gonna end. Would you send us a Google calendar invite so we can be sure to be ready."

Jesus says, "It doesn't work like that. These finite systems you cling to are gonna fall. They just are, because that's how the world works."

We can't spend our lives banking on representations of God. We have to spend our lives believing in, and banking on the reality of God. For it's not the systems created to serve God that continually salvage, and resurrect, and recreate our lives and spirits, it's God that continually salvages, resurrects, and recreates our lives and spirits. And when our faith in institutions is stronger than our faith in God, our judgement becomes muddied, and our future becomes veiled.

How can we sing the songs of our God in a foreign land?

How can live on God's manna, when we excuse ourselves from the banquet of privilege?

How can we do the work of Sardis without seventeen committees and three boards?

How can God still exist if our candidate doesn't win in November?

How can we survive a wintry forecast if we don't hoard every provision from Harris Teeter?

How can God be present a pile of overturned stones?

Jesus doesn't tell us that God's gonna preserve the systems and status quo of this world, nor does Jesus claim that discipleship will be comfortable.

And Jesus doesn't promise that the Empires of this world won't strike back when God's people call them to account. Jesus promises that the Empires won't have the final word. God's people will!

Therefore, when the institutions we believe in, be they our houses of worship, our houses of parliament, our houses of finances, etc...when they fail to live up to their high callings; when they fail to recognize the value, dignity, and worth of every human being as God's beloved...it is our role to be God's prophetic, dissenting voice.

That means, we aren't proclaiming the beginning of the end. It means we're leaning into the beginning of God's beginning. As we look to such a beginning, there may be times when our call for God's justice alienates us from the artificial justice-makers of our time. It may mean peril. It may mean discomfort. It may mean standing in a pile full of overturned stones.

But let me tell you something. God's new beginning isn't something that can be toppled. God's new beginning is real. God's new beginning is coming. And God's new beginning is made possible, each and every time God's people act in love, live in faith, and resound in hope.

May God equip us to be instruments and architects in such a beginning. May it be so, and may it be soon.

Amen.