

**23 Pentecost
November 17, 2019**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Holy Spirit.
Amen.**

A few years ago Caren and I toured southern England and visited lots of churches ... many of them cathedrals. One night we stayed in lodging within the grounds of Canterbury Cathedral ... literally in the shadow of Canterbury Cathedral ... the home church of the Anglican Communion. Another night our hotel room was next to the River Avon ... with swans swimming in its calm waters ... and we looked out over the river at the tallest church spire in all of England ... that of Salisbury Cathedral. As a matter of fact, we saw so many cathedrals the tour took on the nickname of **ABC ... Another Beautiful Cathedral**.

In Edward Rutherford's epic fictionalized history of England ... his book is titled **Sarum** and is eleven hundred forty five pages long ... he suggests that the original site of Salisbury Cathedral was a prehistoric clearing in the woods that the native people considered sacred. Certainly, Salisbury Cathedral, Canterbury Cathedral, Winchester Cathedral ... as well as all the churches we have seen in England, Scotland, France and Spain where we have visited ... they are sacred sites. Indeed, this small church ... St. Cyprian's here in Lincolnville ... is a sacred site ... made sacred by the prayers and rituals, joys and sorrows, triumphs and failures that have been lived out in its 120 year history. However, there really is something awe-inspiring about the 404ft spire of Salisbury Cathedral, and the vaulted ceiling of Notre Dame before the fire, or the undercroft of Canterbury Cathedral ... founded by St. Augustine in 587 ... with its crypt where the murdered archbishop Thomas Becket was buried. These amazing sacred sites really do instilled a sense of awe ... even from a distance.

Before the cathedrals of England and Europe there was the Temple in Jerusalem. According to the 1st century historian, Josephus, the Temple in Jerusalem was an awe-inspiring wonder in Jesus' day. The first Temple, built by Solomon, was destroyed during the invasion of the Babylonians in 586BCE, and then it was rebuilt under King Darius, albeit at a much smaller scale, after the Jews returned from exile. Five hundred years after King Darius the Temple was enlarged and expanded by King Herod 20 years before Jesus was born, but then destroyed by the Romans when they sacked Jerusalem in 70 AD to end the four-year Jewish revolt against Rome. Later, the Romans built their own temple on the site. Then, in the late 7th century, a Muslim shrine was built on the site called the Dome of the Rock. Today the Dome of the Rock sits on the original site of the Jewish Temple.

In the time of Jesus, the Temple's retaining walls were built of stones as large as forty feet long. One can still see some of those stones in the Western Wall ... the Wailing Wall ... a sacred site for Jews to this day. The Temple occupied a platform twice as large as the Roman Forum, and four times as large as the Athenian Acropolis. Herod reportedly used so much gold to cover the

outside walls that anyone who gazed at them in bright sunlight risked blinding themselves. No wonder, then, that Jesus's followers in this week's Gospel reading were so dazzled by their house of worship. As Luke describes the scene, the followers fawned over the adornment of the Temple, remarking on the "beautiful stones" and "gifts dedicated to God" that made up the edifice's splendor.

What the disciples saw was an architectural marvel. It was also the biggest, boldest, and most unshakeable symbol of God's presence that they were capable of imagining. For them, the massive stones of the Temple held religious memory. They strengthened a colonized people's identity. They offered the faithful people a potent symbol of spiritual glory, pride, and worthiness. In short, what the disciples saw as they gazed at the Temple was the religious certainty and permanence those glittering stones displayed to the world. But, is that any different from what we see when we look at our cathedrals ... or even at this church? Don't these walls hold a religious memory of those who have loved, and laughed, and prayed, and cried, and fought in this sacred space?

According to Luke, Jesus wasn't impressed by the disciples' fervor. Instead, he responded to their admiration with a chilling prediction: "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." In other words, even though Jesus and his followers look at the same Temple, they do not see the same thing. The disciples see an impressive home for God. Jesus sees an edifice too small to contain all that God is ... too fragile ... too impermanent ... too static.

Jesus knows that the Temple will be destroyed ... sooner or later. But that does not mean that God has lost a home ... because God is larger than any home. The Temple was destroyed by the Roman ... and Coventry Cathedral was destroyed by German bombing in WWII ... and Notre Dame Cathedral burned because of a workers careless accident. Jesus was saying in his time that God is greater than any edifice ... may we hear that message in our time as well.

Jesus goes on in this reading from Luke with some very scary predictions ... wars, insurrections, plagues, famines, earthquakes. This passage from Luke's Gospel is often described as apocalyptic. Now, if you are like me, your cultural references for "apocalypse" probably includes Marvel superhero movies, the "Left Behind" fiction series, and the Book of Revelation. When I hear the word "apocalypse," I think of interplanetary warfare ... or, the four horsemen ... or vacant-eyed zombies lurching through devastated neighborhoods ... or the wholesale nuclear destruction of the planet.

However, the word "apocalypse" means something quite different. An "apocalypse" is an "unveiling" ... a disclosure of something secret and hidden. To experience an apocalypse is to experience fresh sight ... transparent and honest disclosure ... an accurate revelation. It is to apprehend reality as we've never apprehended it before.

In this sense, what Jesus offered his disciples in the remainder of this week's Gospel reading is an apocalyptic vision. He invited them to look beyond the grandeur of the Temple, and

recognize that God will not suffer domestication. The Temple is not the epicenter of God's work ... God is not bound by mortar and stone. Jesus is saying that God exceeds every edifice ... every institution ... every mission statement ... every strategic plan ... and every symbol human beings create in God's name. And, speaking of God's name ... even that is a way to contain that which cannot be contained. Orthodox Jews do not speak or write the name of God ... God cannot and will not be bound by any name.

For me, that is the point of this story. As much as we may marvel at temples or cathedrals as "houses of worship," they are not the abode of God. Yes, God lives in them, just as God is here in this space with us. Yet, God is much more than a building no matter how awe-inspiring it may be. God is beyond any one faith expression. God is more than any definition. God just is! That is all we can say about God. There is nothing more to be said. God is!

"Let us pray to God that we may be free of God," the 13th century mystic Meister Eckhart wrote, implying that our conceptions of God and faith will always fall short ... always fail. Let us name honestly, he suggests, the imposter, lowercase "g" gods that we invoke because we fear the uppercase MYSTERY who really is. Let us admit that we shape these lowercase "g" gods in our own image, and that they serve us as much as we serve them. In other words, let us endure apocalypse so that truth will set us free. If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously, let us dare to see what Jesus saw.

In the second part of the Gospel story, Jesus teaches his disciples what to do, and how to live, when the walls come tumbling down. Jesus insists on calm strength and truthful testimony in the face of the apocalyptic. "Do not be terrified," he says, when the earth shakes, and nations make war, and imposters preach alluring gospels of fear, resentment, and hatred. Don't give in to despair. Don't capitalize on chaos. Don't neglect to bear witness. God is not where people often say God is. God doesn't fear-monger. God doesn't sensationalize. God doesn't thrive on human dread.

So avoid hasty, knee-jerk judgments. Be perceptive ... not pious. Be imaginative ... not immature. Make peace, choose hope, cultivate patience, and incarnate love ... even as the world reels and changes. Expect things to get hard ... and then expect them to get even harder ... and endure even when they do. Know that God is near, no matter what the world looks or feels like. Speak the truth, trusting that God's Spirit is alive and present in our acts of taking seriously what Jesus took seriously. Be faithful until the end, because God is still ... always and everywhere ... God is still a God of love.

For many of us, this has been an emotionally and spiritually exhausting few years. We need look no further than the daily news to see apocalyptic images scarier than any Hollywood screenwriter might produce. Around the world families are starving ... or living on the streets ... or struggling in the shadow of relentless war ... or suffering racial or sexual violence ... or attempting to cross a national border because the horrors they are leaving behind are worse than the dangers that lie ahead.

In this troubling context, it is easy to despair ... or to grow numb ... or to let exhaustion win. But it is now when the world around us feels the most apocalyptic, that we have to respond with resilience, courage, and truthful, unflinching faith. It's precisely now, when systemic evil and age old brokenness threaten to bring us to ruin that we have to testify without fear and without shame to the Good News that is the Gospel ... the God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus.

What is happening is not death, but birth. Yes, the birth pangs hurt. They hurt so appallingly much. But God is our midwife, and what God births will never lead to desolation. Yes, we are called to bear witness in the ruins, but rest assured: these birth pangs will end in joy. As Jesus said at the end of our Gospel reading, "By our endurance, we will gain our souls."

I can only imagine how awe-inspiring the Temple in Jerusalem was for the disciples of Jesus. I certainly know the awe that I have experienced in seeing churches and cathedrals built in wonderful grandeur. Yet, I also know that these houses of worship are not God's abode ... that God is beyond their finitude ... their impermanence ... their static expression of faith. And when those things happen in life that tear down these edifices ... those tumults, earthquakes, wars, insurrections ... in the greater world around us, or in our own little world in which we live ... God is still present. God still is the God of love. God still is!

Amen.