

Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Isaiah 65:17-25, Canticle 9, Luke 21:5-19
November 13, 2016
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I can't say that this is the gospel I wanted to preach on my next to last Sunday here at Christ and Grace. It is a bit of a downer to say the least. Jesus predicts that it won't be long before the great Temple in Jerusalem will be torn down.

I've started watching a new TV show called "Designated Survivor," starring Kiefer Sutherland. During the very first episode, the entire Congress, Supreme Court Justices and special guests are all in the Capitol Building listening to the president's State of the Union Address. Suddenly bombs explode, and the next thing you see is a plume of black smoke rising from where the Capitol Building was standing. It is in complete ruins. You soon find out that everyone inside has been killed except one person.

Watching it on TV, it wasn't hard for me to imagine that this really could happen since I can still see in my mind's eye those horrifying images of the Twin Towers collapsing 15 years ago.

The Jewish people listening to Jesus knew their history as well and remembered that their first Temple, built by King Solomon, was utterly destroyed by the Babylonians some 600 years earlier. In fact, by the time Luke writes his gospel in 85 A.D., the great Temple in Jerusalem, built by King Herod, has been once again leveled, this time by the Romans. Furthermore, the mistreatment of those who call on Jesus' name – believers – is also taking place. Disciples are being arrested and persecuted both by Jewish authorities and Roman officials, and in some cases, they were ratted out by their own friends and family members.

We can't imagine this happening today. We are most fortunate to live in a country where religious freedom to worship the God of our choice or none at all is protected by law. I said at Bible study Thursday morning that while we should never be persecuted for being Christian, let's make sure we never become the persecutors of those with other religious beliefs.

What I find most interesting here in this text is that Jesus says, when these arrests and persecutions take place, "This will give you an opportunity to testify." We don't usually equate the words "arrest" and "persecution" with opportunity, but then Jesus has a knack for turning the tables on most of our conventional thinking.

Of course, Jesus means for his followers to testify to their faith in him, the very faith that got them into trouble in the first place.

When we think of preparing a defense in court, we mean figuring out a winning strategy that will prove our innocence or get us off the hook, usually with the help of a skilled lawyer. The most common defense is to say, “Judge, I didn’t do it.” That is exactly what Jesus doesn’t want his followers to prepare for ahead of time.

You may remember this story in the Acts of the Apostles. It’s written in chapter 5. Peter and John are arrested for healing a man in Jesus’ name and for preaching in the Temple. But overnight, the prison doors are opened by an angel. The next morning they are back in the Temple preaching about Jesus. They are arrested again and commanded not to speak about Jesus. Peter then says, “We must obey God rather than men.” They are beaten, charged once more not to preach Jesus and released. We’re then told that they rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for Jesus’ sake, and they immediately return to the Temple every day thereafter.

Not much of a defense, “We must obey God rather than men,” but they certainly testified to their faith and their wholehearted allegiance to Jesus.

As I said earlier, we should not be arrested and persecuted for believing in Jesus today, but there have been and will be times in the future when we are tested or challenged by life’s various occurrences. We may face family difficulties or financial stresses. We may experience health problems or severe losses to our property or our loved ones. On a lesser scale perhaps, your presidential hopeful may lose or your long-time doctor or priest may retire. You may also be undergoing or anticipating a major transition in your life.

Whatever the circumstance that throws our life out of kilter, it is an opportunity to testify. This may not be a public affirmation but at least a fortification or expansion of our of our faith. It can be an opportunity to apply faith principles and put more trust in the God who says, “I’ll be with you regardless of the circumstances you find yourself in.”

Some would say that it is only when we find ourselves in uncharted waters that we grow in our faith because our self-dependence is called into question or found to be insufficient. When we reach the end of our limited resources and ask for God’s limitless resources, faith happens – peace and joy and wonderment erupt.

We find that very eruption taking place in the reading from Isaiah this morning. Up until now, the Jewish people have only known forced displacement, sorrow, grief, heartbreak and despair in a foreign land – Babylon. Just as all seems lost, God says through the prophet, “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth.” Listen to the array of positive words the prophet goes on to use here: glad, rejoice, joy, delight, long life, build, plant, chosen, blessed. This passage is a potpourri of glad tidings, a cornucopia of benedictions.

Have the people deserved these? Have they earned such plentiful favor? Not at all. It is God's pleasure to give in abundance at the very moment when it seems that the tank has run completely dry.

The story is told of the man who is looking over the edge of a very deep canyon with sheer cliffs on either side. The rock under his feet gives way and he finds himself hurtling downward toward the canyon floor. Suddenly a branch appears sticking straight out of the cliff face. He grabs it and for the moment his terrifying free fall is halted. He catches his breath and then cries out, "Is there any one up there?" He listens and there is just silence.

He cries a little louder, "Help, Help! Is there anyone up there?" Then a still small voice answers, "Yes, It's me, God."

The man is so relieved. He knows he will be saved now. "Oh God, I am so glad it is you," he says. "Tell me what to do to be rescued from this awful predicament I'm in."

God replies, "Let go of the branch."

The man thinks for a moment and then cries out even louder than before, "Is there anyone else up there?"

Our natural inclination is nearly always to trust in our own instincts and conventional wisdom. Yet, as today's canticle proclaims,

"Surely it is God who saves me.

I will trust in him and not be afraid.

For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense,
and he will be my Savior."

AMEN.