
By Your Endurance You Will Gain Your Souls

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A Sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler

Proper 28C

Isaiah 65:17-25

Luke 21:5-19

*When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with
beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus 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.
,By your endurance you will gain your souls.
(Luke 21:5-6, 19)*

Is Jesus talking about the "end times" this morning? In the gospel of Luke passage, it looks like he is; but I'll get to that in a minute.

Besides these verses in Luke, we also hear the great verses from Isaiah that God "is about to create new heavens and a new earth." The Christian Church likes to talk about things being made new. We think that by talking about it enough, maybe we will actually believe it. We love the psalm that says, "Sing to the Lord a new song!" "All things are being made new," Isaiah proclaims in another place. The phrases conjure up images of freshness and vitality.

But how we delude ourselves! I've been around the Church a long time, and let me remind you of something: in the Church we generally do not like new things! Why, it's the new things that are so often the battlegrounds for church political life!

It'd be fine if the Church stuck with replacing only those things which we want replaced. There's always something we want made new. We want new policies, or new paint in the parish hall. We want the preacher to preach about something new. Sometimes we just want a new priest entirely. But a new sanctuary? Of course not! A new way of praying? No way. Sing to the Lord a new song? No, No, the old ones suit us just fine. The old temples suit us just fine.

"All things made new" is one of the most unsettling and downright controversial themes in the Christian Church. Most of us, I daresay every single one of us, whether we are liberal or conservative, whether we are rural or urban, whether we are large church or small church, have some special image of what church and religion means to us. We definitely do not want that to change. That image is what we inwardly long for when we show up Sunday after Sunday for church. That image may be what we think we had some time long ago. And it's that image, more often than not, which prevents us from experiencing God.

A friend of mine once put it well. "Do you want to know what prevents you from experiencing God the most?" he asked. "The biggest obstacle in the way of your experiencing God is whatever your last experience of God was." Your last

experience, whatever it was, was so wonderful and refreshing and renewing, that you inevitably believe that every future experience will have to be exactly like that. And it won't be.

All of us have some sort of temple that we admire. It might be a literal church. It might be those building block towers that I fashioned as a child. It might be that special place we escape to for refuge and respite. But that temple might also be our own job, or company, or family--good projects!"that we have built up to be proud of. Every one of those temples is one day made new, and we usually don't like to see it fall.

Many of us here today are people who have lost something. Loss often serves the purpose of making us pay attention, making us observe and notice the truth, sometimes for the first time. When we are watching, things are being made new all the time.

Apparently, the great first century temple in Jerusalem was a tremendous structure, a suitable symbol of God's greatness and glory. It was worthy of admiration. But when Jesus noticed his disciples admiring its grandeur, Jesus had to speak this hard truth.

Jesus knew it would one day fall. He could not say for sure when it would be; but he knew it would be a cataclysmic event, an awful event. It would seem like the end of the world itself. It would seem like everything his people had ever worked for, would be gone.

However, Jesus also knew that the temple's destruction would not mean the end of God's creation; it would not mean the end of salvation. So he urged people to bear suffering with hope and patience. His lesson was that all of us suffer, and all of us go through destruction and tearing down. All of us even go through death, but that is not the end. He died himself, but it was not the end. He was resurrected, and God's creative power began again.

When I was a boy, and when my boyhood castles fell, I realized that my great joy was actually in the building, in the layout and construction, in the realization of a completed project. For me, the real joy was seeing an empty living room floor and setting about the construction. What fun it is to build! The fun of creation is just that. It is in the creating, not just in the admiring.

Many of us gather today in beautiful structures. Sometimes they are churches, but sometimes they are the other temples of our lives-companies, families, projects, masterpieces. They are usually wonderful! Look at the large stones!

But these structures-of whatever sort"are not the ultimate focus of our lives; just as churches should not ultimately be the focus in our Christian worship. Jesus was clear, later in his ministry, that when the temple was destroyed, he would build it up in three days. That statement was a puzzle to his disciples until they realized he was talking about the temple of himself, his body, his very identity.

Thus, when the Christian Church gathers and takes communion, we touch something greater than the building or structure. That which is greater is Jesus Christ himself. In the Christian church, we believe that God is actually building a temple greater than our churches and cathedrals. God is actually growing the Body of Christ. When we ask, "Where is Jesus Christ today?" our answer becomes, "The body of Jesus Christ is actually us! The Body of Christ is really the church, us, the community of believers and worshipers and servers!"

It is the same with the other masterpieces of our lives-corporations, families, projects. The critical elements of those temples are not the literal stones, but the living stones of relationship. The people and the relationships are the critical elements. The Body of Christ. The fun part of the church is not sitting around admiring how pretty it looks or how good we feel. The fun part of church is in building up the body of Christ.

I am sure God enjoys our physical cathedrals and temples and projects of whatever sort. But I believe God loves to build up people and relationships-the body of Christ. God loves our learning and our serving, our hugging and crying and laughing. With all that we do good in life, God is creating with us; and God is having fun with us. God is building us into a living temple, the Body of Christ.

The literal stones will all be thrown down, in some way or another, at some time or another. The spiritual stones will endure.

There may be some signs toward the end. Jesus famously mentions some of them in the gospels. Signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, wars and insurrections, earthquakes and the economy. All that. These signs usually indicate larger cycles of time, cycles that we are not quite aware of yet. Stages of our life end sometimes. We think it is the end of the world. But it is not the end of the entire world. Just the end of that particular stage of our world. We enter a new one.

Sometimes the transition hurts. Changes hurt. But they are signs that the kingdom of God is near, is very near. When you are encountering the anxiety of any change in your life, be assured that you are not far from God in that experience; you are, instead, very near.

People often ask me why the Christian Church exists. One of the reasons I give is that the Church is meant to teach us how to change gracefully. How to change gracefully. The classical ministrations of the church have always been associated with changes in our human lives-inevitable changes that most of us go through. I mean changes like birth, illness, marriage, death. In direct association with those changes, the Christian Church provides baptism, anointing with oil, the sacrament of marriage, a funeral. The Church pronounces blessing and grace during those moments of change, painful or joyous.

At its best, the Church teaches us how to change gracefully. Even the changes in Church itself can be occasions for our learning grace.

All will be thrown down, Jesus said. And sometimes we can see the signs of that tumult all too quickly. But that will not be the end. God will be in the change. God will be providing grace even in that change. And all things will be made new.

Finally, it is in all the changes of our lives, that our very identity is formed. Thus, the way we endure change is the way we shape our identity, our very soul. That's why Jesus said what he said about endurance. When we endure change, when we bear change, we gain our identity. In fact, we gain our souls. By your endurance, Jesus said, you will gain your souls.

Yes, all things will be thrown down. But as we re-create ourselves in those changes, we form our souls. By your endurance, you will gain your souls.

AMEN.

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