

Luke 21:5-19

Open-Mouthed Tourists

“A building of shining white marble and gold, with bronze entrance doors, it was said that you could not look at the Temple in daylight as it would blind you.” Before work began on the Temple, Herod spent eight years stockpiling materials for its construction. Then, a workforce of over 10,000 men began its construction including a contingent of 1,500 specially trained priests who were the only ones permitted to work on the innermost and holiest parts of the Temple. Building continued for a further twenty years, though the Temple was in a sufficiently ready state within three and a half years of its commencement to be dedicated.”¹

Normally a city of 100-200 thousand, at times Jerusalem could swell to one million people during particular Jewish festivals. Herod the Great, the political person in charge at the time, had to find a way to deal with the logistics of this massive influx of people. The Temple and the surrounding area were his project. By all accounts of the day, the temple was impressive. It encompassed a large mass of land that was prepared to enable the flow and management of the great numbers of people.

I began this message with taking information as presented on the website *Jewish Virtual Library*. I continue to share from there...

Herod built a great plaza around the Temple...To construct this platform, Herod built a box around Mount Moriah and filled it in. The plaza covered this box and expanded the available land at the peak of the mountain. The plaza is about the size of six football fields. The retaining walls of this box were themselves cause for wonder...The walls are 5m thick and made up of enormous stones weighing between 2 and 100 tons (there is even one that weighs 400 tons) with an average stone being about 10 tons. There is no mortar between the stones and they sit so closely together that not even a piece of paper can fit between them. Such fine maneuvering of the stones is incomprehensible given that even today's modern machinery cannot move such heavy stones.

Also worthy of comment was the overall appearance of the walls which were about the height of a 20 storey building...The precision with which stones weighing over 100 tons were placed 2000 years ago is astounding and mystifying. Furthermore, these stones were merely part of the retaining walls that

¹ [The Second Temple at the Time of Jesus \(jewishvirtuallibrary.org\)](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org). Accessed November 10, 2022.

supported the plaza on which the Temple stood and thus only a prelude to the even more incredible sight of the Temple itself.²

This is the structure that had some of the people talking like open-mouthed tourists. You know the ones with phone or camera in hand ready to take a photo and in the moment just have to stare open-mouthed at the wonder of it all, trying to take in all the sights, the shapes, the sounds. In this scripture, this was the posture of those with Jesus in the Temple as they talked about “how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God.” (v5) Jesus’ unfathomable response was, “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.” (v6) For those with Jesus, that would have seemed an incredulous claim, yet this did happen in 70AD when the Romans destroyed the temple.

In our own time we have seen many edifices that have had us looking like open-mouthed tourists. We have also stood open-mouthed as those structures were taken down by human hands, in acts of war, or by nature’s power. Think of the fire at Notre Dame Cathedral in France, the Berlin Wall, or the Twin Towers.

When asked “when will this be and what will be the sign that this is about to take place” (v7) Jesus goes into a triple threat situation where the people will experience false prophets, wars and insurrections, and nature itself seemingly rebelling.

All of these things the people of ancient times faced. We continue to face them now. It is still hard to believe what we are seeing in politics around the globe with false narratives and spinning of stories. We hear of interference of one nation against another nation. Many of us are still in shock that the Ukraine has become a battle field. Less so are we surprised to hear of Putin’s interference in U.S. elections. We have come to expect that politics and power are corrupting forces. When we vote in elections we hope and pray that those running and elected will care more about people then procedures and towing party lines, but sadly we are often disappointed.

In terms of nature, one need only follow the Weather Network to see how flooding, hurricanes, tornadoes, freezing rain, earthquakes, and mudslides, to mention a few ways that the forces of nature have taken a toll on human life and property.

What we rarely have to think about from our North American homes is that as Christians we will be persecuted for our faith and beliefs. Still, more and more in Canada, the church is being sidelined as insignificant in public discourse and influence. We often find ourselves choosing not to share that we go to church or believe in God for fear of being ridiculed or left out of conversations and invitations. We don’t want to be “betrayed by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends” (v16) or be hated by all because of Jesus’ name.

² Ibid.

We are pretty sure, in fact confident, that the statement, “But not a hair of your head will perish.” (v18) does not mean to say that we will be spared any recourse or suffering in this life time and none of us wants anymore suffering than is necessary.

Yet here we have it, Jesus is saying to those at that time and to us now, be aware, there are things that distract us, from people of influence whether social, political, or powerful, to news of war and insurrections, and natural disasters. And Jesus says, “do not be terrified” (v9). That is quite the call on us. Do not be terrified. Could Jesus really be asking that of us? Who of us would not be terrified as our homes collapse around us or our nations under threat and involved in acts of war? We have seen what it means to have a pandemic threaten and alter our very lives and many are still afraid to leave the safety of their homes for fear of getting sick.

There is nothing in all that Jesus had spoken about happening that we have not witnessed or experienced in some way in our life time. So, what is the hope, the Good News that is ours when reading a scripture such as this?

The thing is, our hope remains in Jesus, in God. We will fear, we will suffer, but in our faith, in our trust that God’s ultimately got this, we can be transformed.

Let me share with you some words written by Rev. Dr. Derek Weber that have helped shape this message today as we sit here to worship, an activity that we choose to do as people of faith and this is important.

... the object of worship is giving praise to God and lifting up the name of Jesus. At the same time, we redeclare our commitment to walk the path of discipleship and live as though we were a part of the kin-dom of God, because we are. It is a moment of perspective, or of realignment. Not that we come and realize that nothing else matters, that the wars and conflicts and deprivations and divisions don’t matter, because all that matters is giving praise to God. To the contrary, we discover that what is happening in the world matters all that much more because of our commitment to Christ and to loving the world that he gave his life for. But we hold on to hope.³

We are Christians called to be a witness to the transforming experience of grace, life, hope, and love that is our faith. We believe in a living God, in the Holy Spirit that gives breath to our very being, and in Jesus, whose life, death, resurrection and ascension gives us life today and always. This transformation is about the value of each person, their dignity, and their vulnerability. It is about transforming the world into one in which God’s will is done on earth as in heaven. God’s will being, that all are given abundant life, hope and the experience that people care, and through us the knowledge that God cares.

³ [Discipleship Ministries | Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost, Year C...](https://umcdiscipleship.org/) (umcdiscipleship.org) Accessed November 10, 2022.

God, not desiring to have puppets give him praise, chooses to work through each of us. It is not straight forward or fully comprehensible as we cannot know the mind of God, but the experience of those whose stories we read in the Bible and our own stories of faith throughout the generations, witness to God's power in the world through human beings, who came to a profound understanding of God at work in the world and of God's grace.

The last line of the scripture is "By your endurance you will gain your souls". Only recently have we come to understand the word soul to mean our hearts, it more aptly refers to our whole inner life, our whole being. Living this human life takes endurance, but it is worth the experience of knowing that God is present with us, has not forsaken us or the world, but is working through each of us to transform the world. We are open-mouthed, not because of structures but because of love and grace experienced in Christ, with God, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.