

“God Rebuilds”

The picture on the screen is a portion of the ruins from the first century temple in Jerusalem. The temple was located on what is still referred to as The Temple Mount, the most holiest site for the Hebrew people. This temple, which stood in the day of Jesus, was a magnificent building. Just to share some of its history this morning, this was the second temple to stand in the Holy City. The first, built by King Solomon a thousand years earlier, was destroyed by the Babylonians. It took 23 years to rebuild it and the second temple stood on the mount for hundreds of years after that as a testimony to the resilience and faithfulness of God’s people. In the time of the Romans, when Herod the Great ruled the land, the temple was expanded and beautified. The foundation stones of the temple were cut from a nearby limestone quarry with many of them weighing between 50 and 100 tons. The largest of the stones measures 44 feet by 16 feet and is estimated to weigh over 500 tons. Now, that’s a rock for the ages. The point being, the structure was quite impressive and it’s no wonder that when the disciples walked with Jesus out of the temple courtyard they looked back and said to him, “Look, teacher, what large stones and what large buildings.” They were impressed and they deserved to be. The temple was an example of what human beings can accomplish. But more than this, the temple was a symbol of the people’s ability to survive and even thrive in the face of much persecution and conflict. The building and its immense stones were a symbol of their spiritual glory, and of their pride and worthiness. The temple would be forever and, thought the people, so would they. The problem with all of this is the simple fact that it wasn’t true. As the picture before us today makes clear, the temple stones would fall, their permanence only temporary and their beauty vulnerable. “Look at these wonderful stones,” the disciples said to Jesus. For him, that was a teachable moment. With his followers captivated by the magnificence of the building, Jesus saw the opportunity to point them to the true source of their strength. “These stones will fall,” he told them. Despite their sense of awe, Jesus knew the temple and everything it represented would not stand the test of time but he also knew that if the disciples continued in their life with him, if they stayed open to the reality of God that was flowing through him and into them, they would discover what it meant to build their lives on the true foundation. It would be for them as the early writings of the church teach in another place in the scriptures, “if this earthly tent we live in is destroyed we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” (2 Cor. 5:1)

One of the remarkable things in reading about the disciples with Jesus is how their story reflects what’s true about our stories. There are thousands of years separating us from them but the lessons Jesus taught speak to us and call us to build our lives on the true foundation. We like big buildings, too. I grew up in central Ohio and when I was a kid I remember the feeling I had whenever we’d drive by the Lincoln-LaVeque Tower down on West Broad St. It was built in 1927 and at the time the 44 story building was the fifth tallest building in the world. It no longer holds that prestigious place but it is still the most recognizable image in the city’s skyline and it brings a feeling of pride and permanence to many who live here. And then, there’s a horseshoe shaped building not far from here, you know, that also elicits a certain degree of pride. Seating well over 100,000 fans, the footprint of Ohio Stadium points to all things that are the biggest and the best in college sports. Yes, we still love our buildings. This is why I say the stories of Jesus are important and relevant for us. We understand the disciples and their fascination with the Jerusalem Temple, and like them we find comfort in the physical presence of magnificent structures, which symbolize the security we long for in this world. The problem is we are just as vulnerable to earth shaking change as the followers of Jesus in the first century. This isn’t something we like to think about but we know it is true. Ultimately, whatever is made with human hands falls. And, let’s be reminded, this is symbolic of the fragile nature of life itself. It’s when the unthinkable happens that our faith in Christ reminds us what is our true source of hope and strength. Like many of you, I will never forget where I was and what I was doing the beautiful day in early September when the Twin Towers fell to the ground. Television coverage made it possible for us to watch what was happening in real time and I remember the feeling of absolute disbelief when buildings, so wonderful and glorious in their design, came crashing down. It wasn’t just buildings that fell that day. The buildings were symbolic of the breaking down of our sense of security. How could that which should always be suddenly be no more? The experience of that terror and tragedy is not unlike what one woman was feeling as a television reporter stood with her in front of the smouldering remains of what had been her family home in Southern California. A day or so before, the recent wildfires had destroyed everything and she looked at the camera and said, “I don’t know what to say. I don’t know what to feel.” And then she said, “It’s like the Apocalypse.” Jesus wanted the disciples to be ready for that kind of experience. Things end. What is strong fails. What we trust will always be there can fade away, and it’s when the very thing we can’t imagine ever happening happens that Jesus points us to the everlasting capacity of God to rebuild our trust and re-establish our hope.

We've been talking about buildings but we know what we're really talking about has nothing to do with brick and mortar or concrete and stone. Jesus turned the attention of the disciples toward God. That turn did not come easily for them. They were an earthbound group. In other words, and this is but another way in which they are so like us, the disciples had trouble letting go of what they could see and touch and hold and control. Still captivated by the temple's glory, the disciples asked Jesus for a sign so they could be ready for the end when it came. I think they wanted the details because they believed that if they knew they could either prevent it from happening or mitigate the damage. They were confident that any people who could build something as magnificent as the temple could, if prepared, fight off any threat. "Give us a sign," they said. "Because if we know, if all of the information is available to us, we'll be OK." Jesus pointed them toward God. He didn't tell them when the end was coming. He didn't give them the day or time or the place. What Jesus did was remind them of how vulnerable they are all the time. "There will be wars and rumors of wars. There will be earthquakes and famines," said Jesus. In other words, there is never a time when you are not vulnerable. "Well," we say to Jesus, "can you give us a sign?" And Jesus responds, "There will be wars and terror and wildfires and great storms and political tension and divisive social issues and health crises that will rock your world." There is never a time when we are not vulnerable and this is why Jesus points us toward God. The signs that we are easily shaken or broken down are all around us but the message to day isn't about the end. When we're vulnerable, when we're broken, when we're afraid or overwhelmed or lost, God brings a new beginning into view. The signs are but the signal that a new birth is about to begin. The stones that fall become the rock that is our salvation. What is temporary and fragile in this world is the building material God uses to set our feet on solid ground. Jesus is the sign. He is the message. He is the new life. When the unthinkable happens God is there creating from that brokenness a foundation for the new thing God is calling into being.

We know that Jesus doesn't give us a sign about when the end comes but there are signs that the new thing has begun. Let's think about the temple stones that have fallen in ruin in Jerusalem. If we were on the Temple Mount today we'd see that one portion of the temple still stands. It is the Western Wall, what we sometimes call the Wailing Wall. If we walked up to the large foundation stones we'd see hundreds, even thousands, of prayer pressed into the cracks and between the joints of the stones, like a mortar of hope and healing, a sign of the new thing God can do when what we depend upon comes crashing down. This sign of faith echoes what we sometimes sing, "In our end is our beginning...in our death a resurrection; at the last a victory, unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see." Jesus stands with us in the midst of what seems to be the end and opens our eyes to see what God sees, endings that become the place to begin.

This week we celebrate Thanksgiving Day. We count our blessings and are so thankful for what we have been given. This week let's shift the focus just a bit. Our deepest thanksgiving is not for all the things we have but our certainty that should all the things we have fall away we still have God. Thanks be to God that at our end there is something God can see - a new and glorious day.