

"Telling the Story"

The Jerusalem temple in the first century was a marvel. King Herod the Great, who left his mark on history for both his ruthlessness and his passion for building incredible structures, renovated the temple and made it a true wonder. The smallest blocks used to construct the walls were 2 or 3 tons each, and the largest foundation stones were reported as being nearly 70 feet long, 18 feet wide, and 15 feet high. Let's let that sink in for a moment. The stones were 70 feet long, 18 feet wide, and 15 feet high. These stones were so large they did not need mortar to hold them together. Nothing was going to move those stones once they were set in place. The temple was truly one of the most marvelous buildings in the ancient world. What do you suppose the people thought the time they stood admiring the temple and Jesus came up to them and said, "The day is coming when not one stone will be left on another; all will be thrown down"? (Luke 21:6) The people must have thought Jesus was crazy. This incredible building? The holy temple? Destroyed? What was Jesus talking about? This was God's house. The people believed the very presence of God Almighty resided in the temple. What power on earth could ever shake their confidence in a structure that, for them, was the centerpiece of their faith? Well, Jesus predicted it and by the time Luke wrote the words of his gospel the Roman Empire had re-established its hold on the territory, occupied Jerusalem once more, and destroyed the wondrous temple. The Romans in all their might, had pulled the great stones to the ground. We are not surprised. Jesus had a way of always being right. It's not so much that Jesus was good at predicting the future. It's more that Jesus knew anything built by human beings, and especially that which was built by the likes of King Herod, would never last. Jesus wanted the people to be prepared for the time when the temple stones would fall and the earth would shake. Even more than this, Jesus wanted his followers to be ready for the troubles they would endure. If an incredible building like the temple was vulnerable so were they. Because of this, Jesus went on to predict that his followers would be arrested and they would suffer because of their faith. In the way the immense temple stones would fall to the ground, the foundation of their trust in God would be shaken. Once again, Jesus' prediction was spot on. By the time Luke writes his gospel, Christians were being persecuted. The believers were tortured and some of them stoned to death. Our Lord was right, in the first century it was a frightening time to be loyal to Christ.

The message of the 21st chapter of Luke's Gospel is heavy, to be sure, but what is so life-giving about the words of Jesus is that he does not leave us with only bad news. Jesus is the bringer of good news. Now, let's clarify what we mean. To say Jesus brings good news does not mean he pretended everything was OK when it wasn't. What we're saying is Jesus knew there would be hardship and he knew tough times would challenge us, and his message in the face of it all was that this is not the end. Jesus told his followers that when they were threatened and when the world was against them it was an "opportunity to testify." (Luke 21:13) Think about that for a moment. Troubled times bring the strongest witness for God. Jesus gives us something deeply important to hold on to. When the worst happens, when our faith is questioned and our loyalty to God is shaken, this is the time to name the power of God at work in our lives. And to this, Jesus added even more. Should the early followers or any of us feel we won't be able to stand up for God in the heat of the moment, Jesus says that he, himself, will come to us and give us the words to say. Most often the words of our prayers ask God to prevent the tough experiences from happening. We want God not only to protect us but to insulate us from trouble. Our Lord, who took on the greatest of all threats as he hung on the cross, says that when difficulty comes it's our time to speak the power of God. The hard times are the right time to make clear nothing can ever separate us from God. Again, let's let this sink in. This faith we hold so dear is not just about what God can do. Our faith is about what God does through us. When the stones fall and when the ground shakes, our lives become the channel through which we tell the story of God's life-giving power.

When I realized the bible reading we are considering today fell on a Sunday we call "family worship," I thought about changing the preaching text. There are Sunday mornings when we change up the regular flow of our children's Sunday School and invite families to worship together. A Bible reading of destruction and hardship doesn't seem very kid-friendly. Wouldn't it be better to find a passage in the Bible that is more hopeful and happy. I was tempted to find some other Jesus story to share today. Then, I realized, the good news Jesus gives to us in the midst of the hardship is exactly the right word for our children and for all of us. The violence in the California school this past week is the sad reminder how vulnerable we are. When our kids are baptized into this faith we celebrate the love of God in their lives. God's love is clearly hopeful and happy but the love of God we celebrate isn't with our kids only when everything is going great. God's love is there for them always. The lessons of the bible we learn in Sunday School is not a message that says Jesus will be by our side only on the good days. We want our young people to know that no matter what comes there is a presence of God with them that will keep them strong.

Somewhere along the way, for them and for us, what we trust and count on will let us down. Pretending that is not true lessens the power of our faith. The story we want our children to know is that even if the foundations of the earth should fall away, God's steadfast love endures forever.

Our reading is from the 21st chapter of Luke today but let's be reminded of the words of the psalmist in the Old testament. What does the bible say? Let's find out. Reach for one of the bibles in the pew rack and turn with me to Psalm 136. This is the story we tell because Jesus stands with us and gives us the words to say.

*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.
O give thanks to the God of gods,
for his steadfast love endures forever.
O give thanks to the Lord of lords
for his steadfast love endures forever... (Psalm 136)*

Gun violence, impeachment hearings, politics, and denominational turmoil, in all these ways and many more we feel the ground shake beneath our feet. What are the words Jesus gives us to say? What is the story we tell and the witness we make in response to all that threatens the foundation of our faith? The words given to us are like the ones printed on the cover of our announcement tri-fold each week. We are here "To share Christ's love with everyone." These words are not just a pleasant phrase. This is our witness. We will have opportunities as this coming week goes along to tell the story. It may come in a work related situation where our integrity is challenged. It may come in a troubled relationship where the consequences of our actions or words weigh heavy. It may come in the quiet witness we make through a note to a friend or a conversation with a troubled colleague. When we speak it will be our own words but Jesus' message will echo in what we say. This is our prayer, that Jesus will speak through us to make clear that peace is the greatest power of all, that forgiveness can be more right than being right, that people are more important than policy, and that not only does Jesus love me because the Bible tells me so but Jesus loves you, too. This is the word of God for the people of God.

I've never been all that good at memorizing scripture and maybe you haven't been either. But this week we can memorize the words Jesus would want us not to forget. This week in whatever way we are called upon to testify, we will find a way to say, "God's steadfast love endures forever." Amen.