

"Living, Daring Faith" (13Nov16) Luke21:5-19
2Thessalonians3:6-13 Isaiah65:17-25 Psalm98

Let's begin with those beautiful stones of the temple, since just over a week ago some of us were in that place, outside that temple area by the remaining western wall of the ivory limestone that fills the Holy Land hills and adorns almost all buildings.

Still, those remnant rocks may pale to the beauty those followers of Jesus were noticing. A book I was reading on the trip called *Excavating Jesus* quoted the ancient Jewish historian Josephus that the temple "appeared from a distance like a snow-clad mountain; for all that was not overlaid with gold was of purest white" (Crossan & Reed, 256).

In Luke the disciples name this beauty, while in Mark they comment "what large stones" (13:1). They were right; the biggest stones in that wall were each "40 feet in length and over 10 feet in height...14 feet thick" and weighed more than 500 tons (236-7).

The enormous scale and incomparable beauty were designed only partly to inspire awe for God, and to a greater degree for reflecting the power and majesty of King Herod the Great. He was a cruel ruler who didn't care a lick for oppressed workers and didn't respect the religion, but was manipulating the system to serve his own grandiose ego. That was his goal. We may consider it with *schadenfreude* that his immense building project got destroyed. "Not a stone left on stone," as Jesus said.

Doubly ironic, even the remaining wall he had constructed came not to be a place to admire an ancient King, but of wailing and looking for God's presence. Now, that famous Western Wall wasn't part of the temple itself, but a lower foundation on the far side of the temple compound. Still, it has served as the mark of something gone, something lost, and

that wall has been labeled as the holiest Jewish site.

I confess that has prevented my prayers there, of sticking a slip of petitioning paper into the cracks. While some in our group used the occasion very well in hopes for both Israelis and Palestinians, with prayers yearning for peace for Jews, Christians, and Muslims together, still I haven't been able to convince myself to pray there. Partly it's because it feels unfair or out of place to give so much significance to one perspective, and not just religiously but also with national grandiosity, which strives to undercut the faithful devotion up on top of that wall, of Muslims who want to pray at the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque.

And it seems odd to me to identify that wall so worshipfully when we don't hold that level of piety for our own Christian locations, if you could even name what might be our holiest sites. Mostly our group found the ancient sanctuaries marking Jesus' beginning in Bethlehem and end in Jerusalem to be commotion and distraction with little spirit of holiness.

Generally we're left with that ambiguity about our stones and how they mesh with the practice of our religion. Also prompted by *Excavating Jesus*, let's reflect on the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, built over the likely location of Jesus' crucifixion and burial. It was constructed under Constantine the Great, another ruler claiming that self-important title of greatness. In 325, he converted the Roman Empire to Christianity, or we might have to say converted Christianity to the Empire. When he built that church 1700 years ago, he modeled it on the halls of royalty and the style of burial emperors were given.

But the enormous scale and marbled beauty meant a change for Christianity. These stones also came to mark something lost and gone. This

church was, after all, named after the tomb, a place of death, a memorial, as "Holy Sepulcher."

Contrast that with what the angel at that tomb asked on Easter morning: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? Jesus has risen. He's not here!" (Luke 24:5). From our very beginning, we were sent away from the tomb to follow our resurrected leader. See, this faith of ours is about life and hope and action. This is not fundamentally a faith or practice of walls and structures. This isn't about our large or beautiful stones, but is about the "living stones" (in words from the Bible's book of 1st Peter 2:5 that Palestinian Christians often use). This way of Jesus isn't stuck in old archeology but is alive and on the move. When the Emperor built that central church for his own sense of glory, its byproduct was attempting to kill, to euthanize, to bury the church that was living as the body of Christ. But our Kingdom doesn't have a palace, isn't memorialized in a tomb. It spreads wherever we go, through the ongoing life of Jesus in us, as in us he continues his work of reconciling, healing, blessing, striving for God's will of peace and justice on behalf of all.

For this role of ours and the enormous efforts in which we participate, perhaps the most fitting phrase of the day came at the end of our 2nd reading, "Do not weary in doing what is right." That is a perfect faithful instruction, but we also know it's hard. There are many of us who are passionate about this work but are, indeed, weary, who are frustrated and worn out, who are upset and confused. In this week, for many of you that first means the election and the news. But we've always got plenty of ongoing struggles. It's in our families. It's that time is too short, and more so in busy, dark days of autumn. It may be sickness or sleeplessness. This may be lonely work that uses us up. Or it may be so simply that we don't know what to do, how to go forward, what our

next steps should be. We may very well be weary in trying to do what is right.

But that's not new to us. In his words today, Jesus spoke of catastrophe, when literal walls collapse and (maybe worse) when metaphorical ones don't. He spoke of wars and violence. These aren't predicting harbingers of coming endtimes, but are ongoing realities of the sad divisions in this world. These things have always happened, and they still do, even while we continue striving ahead. Jesus realizes it is difficult to persist in doing right. We may feel terrified or persecuted or be betrayed. He even says that some will be arrested for their persistence of following him.

With that, I want to help you hear this not just framed by the context of an election, but also with another set of ears. Two weeks ago on Reformation Sunday, our group noticed how different it was to sing "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" in Bethlehem, and not just because the congregation sang in Arabic. With people living under a military occupation, it was a strong, new sense to sing, "Though hordes of devils fill the land all threaten'g to devour us, we tremble not, unmoved we stand; they cannot overpower us."

These are enormous words of promise, but must also seem foolish. We met women whose sons were locked in jail because of Facebook posts, and men who lost jobs for resisting the occupation, and there were families whose homes were destroyed and whose generations-old olive trees were uprooted. We heard of mistrust of corrupt government and the fear of interacting with neighbors or even family because they might be bribed as informants. This sure seems to be threatening to overpower.

And yet this faith persists. This is the remarkable thing. This community continues together. We followers of Jesus proceed ahead.

The pastor of Christmas Lutheran, Mitri Raheb's book *Bethlehem Besieged* offers glimpses of the struggles of what it's like to live under occupation and still find hope. He tells of those who snuck out while under curfew so they could gather for worship, and of an ecumenical and interfaith silent resistance march, and of an organ restored with overseas help in time for Christmas Eve worship.

This is the living, breathing, embodied faith that can't be sealed inside a tomb to be memorialized by large stones, but breaks out and keeps moving ahead. It is the faith that plants a new olive tree that will grow for the next thousand years, or even hopes in that possibility, battling against despair. This is a living, daring, confident hope (as Martin Luther termed it) that allows us "to stake our lives a thousand times," he said, to serve even through suffering (Luther's Works 35, 370-1). Our faith isn't headquartered in a central building or confined in big old pretty walls, but endures in community, gathered here, not in commiseration but compassion, and not only in this circle, but in connection with sisters and brothers, young and old, around the world, and even wider, as our Psalm reminds us, when the music of our song is joined with pounding ocean waves and singing birds, over hills, down rivers, across all lands.

Of course King Herod the so-called Great in his selfish pride could not put up walls that would stand against that. Neither could the greatness of the Roman Empire overpower it. The gladness and joy that God continues striving to create among us keeps bursting out, bending weapons, healing pain, reconciling nations. Perhaps the most vital vision of that today, when we feel so divided and some are fearing what is to come, Isaiah sees that God's work among us is bringing all into unity, the wolf and the lamb together.

Again, then, in the face of all the sorrows and struggles and weariness, we practice persistence. This makes it so timely today to be pledging our time, talent, and treasure, for each other and for God's ongoing work. We are not people scared into scarcity, but trust and see the abundance of our amazingly diverse skills and commitments that keep growing and spreading. Our extravagance and boast is in what we share. We trust and see what God is accomplishing through us, and also for us, in how we support each other and reach out to the world around us, doing what is right for people who need our help and for all creation. This is what we offer together, empowered by Jesus. This is how our faith lives, and nothing can kill that.

Hymn: *Everything is One*