

Whose Temple?

Luke 21: 5-19

5 When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, 6 “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.”

7 They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” 8 And he said, “Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them.

9 “When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.” 10 Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; 11 there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

12 “But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. 13 This will give you an opportunity to testify.

14 So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; 15 for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. 16 You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. 17 You will be hated by all because of my name. 18 But not a hair of your head will perish. 19 By your endurance you will gain your souls.

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible with Apocrypha

Today’s Scripture reading from Luke is more than a little unsettling. This isn’t some feel-good parable or story. Jesus is talking about the destruction of Jerusalem and the magnificent temple that he and the disciples are standing in front of. He talks about natural disasters, political upheaval, false prophets, persecution, death and destruction. I can’t help but think about the scene from the movie “Ghostbusters”, with the four Ghostbusters talking to the Mayor of New York City, warning him and the other city officials about the disasters to come.

But what is Jesus speaking about? Is he referring to the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem that happens in the year 70 AD? Is he talking about something further in the future, about the end of the world? Is he speaking metaphorically, like he so often does in his parables?

This is the third temple. Solomon built the first temple, which was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 B.C. When the Jews returned from their captivity in Babylon, they built the second temple, smaller than the first. Herod tore down that temple in 20 B.C. to make room for *his* temple -- the one that the disciples admire.

Herod's temple, under construction for half a century, will not be completed until 63 A.D. But even in Jesus’s day it is magnificent to behold. It sits on a high spot in Jerusalem. The historian Josephus tells us that the facade is a hundred cubits wide and a hundred cubits high - 150 feet - as tall as a fifteen-story building. Furthermore, Josephus says that, "being covered on all sides with massive plates of gold, the sun was no sooner up than it radiated so fiery a flash that persons

straining to look at it were compelled to avert their eyes, as from the solar rays."

The temple was just as magnificent inside. Thousands of people made a living from the temple - selling offerings, changing money, housing pilgrims. The temple was a major part of the economy of Jerusalem.

Earlier in Luke, Jesus predicted the fall of Jerusalem. Now he predicts the destruction of the temple. Jesus' prophecy will be fulfilled a few decades later, in 70 A.D. when the Jews will rebel against the Romans and will be punished by a siege. Jerusalem, at first a refuge for its citizens, will become a trap as the Roman siege tightens. Most of the people there will be killed by the Roman army; the rest will be taken into captivity; and Herod's temple will be utterly destroyed.

So maybe Jesus is merely predicting what will happen a few decades in the future.

Some people think that Jesus is talking about the end of the world. After all, this scripture sounds like it might have come from the book of Revelation. And many Christians believe that Revelation predicts events that will happen at the end of the world before the second coming.

The book of Revelation has created an entire industry dedicated to interpreting and explaining its events and predictions. The "Left Behind" books, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, have sold by the millions and have a devoted following. I counted twelve books from the "Left Behind" series for sale on the Amazon.com website. Apparently, millions of people around the world read these books, not only for their entertainment value, but to learn what the authors think the Bible is saying about what the last days of the world will be like.

Now I have read the Book of Revelation, and I like to think that I understood at least some of what it said. But I'll have to admit that I didn't get *anything* from Revelation like what the "Left Behind" books have in them. But maybe LaHaye and Jenkins see something in Revelation that I don't. In any event, we don't have any way of knowing whether the events described in Revelation - or in today's scripture passage - will happen, until they actually *do* happen.

So maybe Jesus is predicting what will happen at the end of the world.

But that isn't really satisfying to me. We know from reading the Gospels that Jesus doesn't just tell stories or say things for no reason at all. When Jesus tells a story, he means to teach the listeners something. Something about what the Kingdom of God is like, or something about what the listener should do and believe. So, I would rather think that Jesus is telling us this to teach us something.

We know from reading Luke that Jesus is angry about the temple and the things that are going on there. After all, not long before, Jesus cleansed the temple of the money changers and the people selling sacrifices. He told the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, pointing to his death at the hands of

the keepers of the temple. And ever since he arrived in Jerusalem, the Pharisees and the Sadducees - the religious authorities - have been trying to trap him, to discredit him and get him in trouble.

The disciples see the beauty and adornment of the temple, but they don't see the spiritual bankruptcy behind the facade -- the hypocrisy -- the oppression -- the rejection of the Messiah and the Gospel -- and the impending death of God's Son at the hands of the religious authorities.

So perhaps in telling this to the disciples, Jesus is saying that God reserves especially harsh judgment for those who hide behind a facade of empty religious practice. That even the finest religious buildings have no value unless people faithfully do God's will. And that even our most magnificent works -- even those that seem most enduring -- are but for a moment.

But there are other types of temples. One story that serves as an example might be that of the Great Lakes Crossing, a shopping center in Auburn Hills, Michigan that opened for business in 1998.

By 10:00 am of the day when the mall opened, 13,000 people were waiting. Some people had traveled two hundred miles, taken the day off work, and pulled their kids out of school. By closing time that day, more than 54,000 people had visited Great Lakes Crossing.

The new mall cost \$200 million, and expected to draw 17 million visitors a year, more people than the population of Malaysia. It boasted 140 stores and 7000 parking spaces, not counting the spaces for 2,500 employees.

Opening day was a big deal. Door prizes, marching bands, Miss Michigan, raffle tickets, free samples. People thronged to the mini amusement park and theme restaurant, the virtual reality and video arcade, and the Rain Forest Café that featured chest-thumping gorillas. (I don't know whether the gorillas were real or not.)

Great Lakes Crossing represents, not simply a way for some people to spend money and others to make it, but more specifically what the Detroit Free Press called, "the ever-growing consumer need to be entertained while shopping."

Many in the crowd that opening day were very taken up with the whole thing. A resident of St. Clair Shores shouted, "This is history!" as she shouldered somebody else out of the way to get inside. A pair of sisters in their late sixties waited outside for two hours in freezing temperatures. Another woman, visiting from Windsor, Ontario, reported that she was sleepless the whole night before, and that this is what she had been waiting for--a *big* mall.

Great Lakes Crossing is designed and presented as a sacred site in our society. Certainly its proportions are impressive, monumental, designed to welcome the visitor and make that visitor seem small, just one of the crowd. The mall is the size of a city. It is one vast temple of consumerism and entertainment under the direction of a large and efficient hierarchy.

The response of the opening day crowd had elements of religious devotion: pilgrimage from distant points, eager longing, the willingness to undergo hardship for some great good, losing oneself in a

mystery that offers significance and salvation. The Jerusalem temple was where a religion became an economy. Great Lakes Crossing is where an economy becomes a religion.

Now I have never been to Great Lakes Crossing, but it sounds very similar to the Mall of America in Minneapolis - that I have been to. Closer to home, the Gateway in downtown Salt Lake City also attracted large crowds when it opened a couple of years ago.

I read an even stranger story recently. In the Czech Republic, people have become avid consumers since the fall of the Iron Curtain. So much so that a couple of men decided to play a prank on the people there. They advertized in the local paper and on TV that a new shopping center was being built outside of town. In an empty field, they constructed a false front hidden behind a tall fence. It was like a Hollywood movie set. For months, people would drive out to the field to try and get a look at what was going on, and to see how things were progressing. On the appointed day, the fence was removed, and thousands of people swarmed the field only to find that they had been had. What they thought was a new shopping center was just a false front in an empty field. If only people were as anxious to come to church.

As strange as it may sound, Great Lakes Crossing, the Mall of America, or the Gateway are temples. If shopping and entertainment are our goal, then they are a holy site, an American Jerusalem, a Babylon with plenty of parking.

And just as strange, in this Scripture Jesus promises the eventual overthrow of every such place and its ideology, whether that ideology means a religion has become an economy as in the time of Jesus, or an economy has become a religion as today.

The problem reaches beyond developers, merchants, and customers. The problem lies in the human condition, yours and mine. As a passage from *The Book of Common Prayer* says: "*we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves.*"

So then, if the Jerusalem temple is no more, and the modern temples like Great Lakes Crossing will be gone someday, is there another temple, one that will remain forever? Is there a temple where humanity, with clean hearts, can meet the true God?

The answer is yes. We find that temple in a surprising spot. It is not huge structure that dominates the landscape. The temple that I am talking about is the body of Christ.

While in Jerusalem - in John 2:19 - Jesus said "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it again." He did not mean a building; he meant his body. His body was destroyed in death, yet resurrected to eternal life. That body still abides. And that body includes all of his people.

This is the new temple, the everlasting temple, raised not by human construction, but by the sacrifice of Jesus and grace of God. All are welcome to live in this temple. The doors of the temple are always open.

So, what about this temple? The prayers we make, the pledges we fulfill, the talents we use, the time we dedicate--these are gifts offered in the only temple that will remain. We don't give gifts to

maintain a building, support an institution, shore up something temporal or transitory. We give gifts so that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be turned and transformed into the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.

Pray with me: Lord, may we enter the only temple that matters, the temple of your son Jesus Christ, the source of our hope and strength and salvation. Amen.