

The Teacher and the Temple
First Baptist Church of Rochester, NY
25th Sunday after Pentecost
by Rev. Benjamin Smith

If I'm being honest, I don't think about the passage that Dave just read very often. Maybe that's because I don't find it an easy one to read. Jesus and his disciples are in the big city, and, as they're leaving the synagogue, one of his disciples looks up and points to the impressive tall buildings. I picture the disciples in New York City as they look up in amazement— the rush of people walking quickly by and the sound of car horns reverberating against the buildings above. As they take the scene in, one disciple says with wonder, "What large buildings!" We all remember the feeling of visiting a big city for the first time. I've probably said those exact words. It's an amazing feeling to be in the presence of something so big. Jesus replies, "You see them? Well, not one stone will be left from them; they will all be thrown down."

If I were visiting the big city with Jesus, my trip would've been ruined. I mean, what a totally unhelpful response! There isn't much time to react, though, as they cross the busy street together and sit down at the Mount of Olives facing the temple. I imagine them walking silently to the Mount of Olives, everyone trying to make sense of what Jesus just said. Finally Peter, James, John, and Andrew break the silence and ask, "So, this destruction you just mentioned. When will this happen? And how will we know when it's about to?"

When I read this text getting ready for this sermon, I thought Jesus was saying that, eventually, this building, like all things people make, will fall down, but his decision to use the phrase *throw down* makes me think he is talking about a real event, about violence even. The disciples seem to think so, too. In fact, they seem to be so caught off guard that they don't ask Jesus *why* this event will happen, but *when*. But instead of answering their questions, Jesus gives them advice. I can only imagine how infuriating that must've been. "Don't let anyone lead you astray," he says. "Many will come in my name," he warns. He tells them that, when they hear about wars happening, to not be alarmed, because, as he puts it, "they must take place. The end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes and famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs."

If their disciples weren't already confused, they sure are now. I picture them sitting on the hill together blinking as they look forward in confusion, not sure what to ask next. This is where our story this morning ends.

There's a lot we can tell from this passage, such as how quick the disciples are to notice things that look *great* or *sacred*. After all, these were the same disciples who, not long ago, heard Jesus complain about people who made the temple a "den of thieves." Even then, they tried to get him to be as much in love with nice places as *they* were, saying, "What buildings are here, and what manner of stones! We've never seen the like in Galilee. Don't leave this fine place." No wonder they tried to get him to love the temple, too.

We can also tell from his response how little Jesus seems to care about outward pomp. Instead of admiring the temple with the disciples, he reminds them not to get too attached, because the temple, just like all things people make, is temporary. For a lot of people, this is the core meaning of this passage. Jesus wants to teach the disciples a lesson about priorities and materialism and *does*, even if he catches them off guard.

This passage also reminds us how normal it is to want to know the things that will happen in the future. Jesus has just referred ambiguously to a future catastrophe and the disciples, just like you and I would, want to know more. Should they be prepared? What should they do? And how will they know when this is about to happen?

Their questions also show us how deeply they trusted their teacher. Without warning, Jesus has just told them that the building they admire will be thrown down before people's eyes, which, understandably, alarms them. Immediately they ask to know not only when this will happen, but how to recognize the signs that it is about to.

If I were a passerby overhearing this conversation, I would've been alarmed, but if I were a *disciple*, I would've had *serious* cause for concern. As Jews, the disciples would have associated the messiah with the temple, and, as his students, I'm sure they figured they might one day have a place in it. For Jesus to suggest that the holiest building they can think of would one day be thrown down not just diminishes the symbolism of the temple in Judaism, but threatens their personal futures.

After all, what king doesn't have a throne? And what rabbi doesn't have a temple?

What is *most* striking to me about this passage is how stoically Jesus announces the end of the temple— but, as we remember, Jesus has *always* had a complicated relationship to the temple, one that the disciples, who love to point out how beautiful it is, still seem so ignorant of. For years Jesus has been exposing the temple's underlying corruption, chasing money changers away and calling out Sadducees, while the disciples continue to ignorantly admire the place. Now, near the end of his time with them, Jesus senses that events are going to escalate and needs his disciples to be on the same page as him. But they aren't, and he is short.

I wonder the grief Jesus must've felt every time he saw the temple. The place where he grew up asking rabbis questions, where he fell in love with his faith and was shaped and nurtured by his teachers he had watched fall to institutional corruption, a place where he was no longer disappearing from his parents to to be with rabbis, but flipping tables.

I wonder if the temple was even the same place for Jesus anymore. Behind his glib announcement of its destruction, I hear grief, grief that the disciples continue not to see. After all these years of him watching the place he loved fall to abuse, no wonder he didn't answer the disciples' questions. Maybe he just didn't have it in him.

Maybe, for him, the temple had already fallen.

We know that Jesus wasn't a mean person, so I don't think he meant to sound so uncaring. Instead, he was probably just defeated—defeated by how little the temple seemed to have changed despite all his effort to fix it and defeated that the disciples *still* couldn't see. If I were him, I would wonder whether my ministry had worked at all and whether the disciples were *ever* going to get it. I don't know if I would have even *had* a response.

Jesus seemed to know that things were going to escalate soon from here. Four chapters ago, he knew that he was going to be killed soon and broke the news to the disciples. He can sense his ministry coming to a close, and, with his arrest looming in the next chapter, I can't help but feel terrible for him. What an awful place to be.

We find Jesus in this low spot just a week before Christ the King Sunday, a day where the global church celebrates his reign over creation, a far cry from the Jesus we are reading about this morning. If you ask me, Jesus probably had a hard time seeing himself as a great leader, too, that day.

Now, as they gather together for one of the last times, nothing has changed. When the disciples insisted on knowing more, on facts and dates, Jesus doesn't give them what they ask for.

But, because he is Jesus, he doesn't give them nothing. Without answering, he speaks: "When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs."

Maybe by not giving them answers to their question, he was telling them what he'd been telling everyone from the start— that what they *do* matters more than what they *know*, a point he had been trying to get across to the Pharisees for years, a point that, if the Sadducees and other temple leaders would just understand, everything would be alright.

But it looks like there is more work to do. Jesus can only do so much until his time is up.

Which might not be all so bad. Besides, Jesus doesn't tell the disciples to try to stop the temple from being thrown down, but echoes the words God said to his ancestor Abraham: "Do not be afraid."

Maybe, to Jesus, the temple *needs* to be destroyed.

Maybe, for Jesus, the temple needed to be thrown down first in order to come back better. Maybe its destruction would be the birth pangs of a different, better one. Maybe his faith didn't even *need* a temple.

That isn't to say that Jesus didn't appreciate the temple or that temples don't continue to be important to many people today, but that, rather, maybe some things *need* tearing down and to be rebuilt in order to become better.

We will all face things in our lives that are broken. Maybe faith isn't about knowing how to fix them, but recognizing when to fix them and when to let them go.

All of this stuff is part of what it means to live a life that matters, a life which, as Jesus told everyone, isn't about what we know, but, instead, about what we *do*.

Much later, when Jesus would reappear to his disciples after his predictions about his death had come true, they didn't ask questions this time. Instead, they *did* something; they touched him. Which makes me think that, maybe, just maybe, they *did* get the point that day. Amen.