

Philippians 4:1-9

Luke 21:5-1

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

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By Your Endurance

As I read today's gospel reading, it's likely that your heart and mind went into the space where my own heart and mind went when I read it and studied it this week. The words, nation rising against nation, war, insurrections, earthquakes... it feels a little too real and accurate right now. The tragedy and terror, fear and helplessness I and I'm sure many of you feel with the news that continues to pour out from Israel and Palestine is horrendous and complex, complicated and downright sinful. No matter what I say about that conflict, it will never be enough, and my heart has been so heavy about it all as I'm sure yours has too. On top of that, the major earthquake that struck Afghanistan and killed over 2,000 people this week is falling to the sidelines while aftershocks continued to hit and devastate the land and people. And that's not even factoring in a friend of mine whose husband died suddenly in his sleep last week after going down for a nap because he didn't feel well, leaving behind a grieving widow and a 2-year old son and family and community stunned at his loss. He was 45 years old. It feels like the earth is groaning in lament in so many ways these days.

Now I know that when tragedy strikes or world events happen that make us feel so helpless we do not know what to do, some of us turn to trying to justify or explain away pain. We seek reasons and justification for it all. The other response is to look away or hide or ignore it all for our own well-being. And so before I go any further, I want to say, I get that. If that's where you need to be today to handle all of what is going on in the world and in your life, okay. It's okay. Take from this sermon the nuggets you might need to get through.

For me, after sitting with this text for a week, there is a word I feel like needs to be proclaimed today that seeks to move us away from complacency or the simple acceptance of "this is just how things are."

Because you see, in our gospel reading today, I sense that Jesus is irritated with his followers. I feel like he's annoyed. What takes place right before our reading in Luke was the familiar story of the poor widow putting her last two small copper coins into the treasury with all the rich people throwing down their huge gifts around her. Jesus points her out, someone I'm sure they didn't even see or notice, and highlights her giving and says that she has put in more

than all of them. Jesus intentionally points out the one that no one is noticing, shares a full lesson with his followers about her faithful act, calls them to see her and notice her, and in the very next verse, as they're still walking through the temple, it's like they totally forgot what he said and they are talking about the beautiful stones and gifts that are adorning the temple around them. He just told them to stop focusing on those kinds of things and in the next moment it's like "Oooooo shiny!" and they immediately forget.

Now, I don't want to gloss over the disciples' ooing and ahing too quickly like it was no big deal. The temple *was* a sight to see, covered in gold and truly an architectural marvel. I read that it occupied a platform twice as large as the Roman forum. It was not just a building, but the biggest and unshakeable symbol of God's presence they can imagine. What the disciples see is religious certainty and permanence in those glittering stones.

Theologian Debie Thomas writes, "That's what the disciples see. But what does Jesus see? He sees ruins. Rubble. Destruction. Fragility, not permanence. Loss, not glory. Change, not stasis. Jesus sees all that must break and buckle and end before new life and new hope will emerge. He sees the necessity of death before the promise of resurrection."

After their oos and ahhhhs, Jesus' first verbal response to them is, "These things that you see? The days will come when not one stone will be left upon another. All will be thrown down."

He keeps going. "You will be betrayed by parents and relatives and friends; you will be hated because of my name; nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; there will be famines and plagues and earthquakes. Oh and by the way, before this all happens, you'll be persecuted."

Dang Jesus. This is a lot to take in. It's not even like a healthy challenge on how to bring God's upside down kingdom here on earth. These are all the things that people try everything to avoid. *No one* wants to be hated or persecuted, especially by people we love. We do not want to see the world fall apart by natural or human-made disasters. We do not want innocent people to die period. No matter what the reason. You all, Jesus is not making my job easy today.

But you know, my task is not as Jesus' PR manager in that I need to help him cover up what he's just said for the sake of his reputation and for ours as his followers. You see, one of the first rules of public relations is to tell the truth and to tell it fast. And although Jesus is not saying things that are pretty or

flowery or easy, he is speaking truth...truth to the disciples who in that moment are listening to him, truth to the listeners who hear this way after the temple does crumble, and truth for us even today.

And so his response brings the disciples back to Jesus again. Their response is one of fear. "When? What's the sign that it's going to happen? We need to be prepared. We can't let this happen."

In his troubling response, it feels easy to throw our hands up in the air and give up and despair. What's the point then, Jesus?!

But if you notice, in the midst of this terrible response to their question, Jesus tells them not to be terrified, do not be afraid...in the midst of the truth of what will be, he reminds them not to give into despair, to not capitalize on chaos, but reminds them instead all of this will then be an opportunity to testify, that they will be given wisdom and words, and that they are called to endure through it all because through their endurance they will gain their souls. He's telling us that we should expect things to get hard and then expect them to get harder. Endure even when they do.

Friends, we are being invited again to remember that God is near no matter what the world looks or feels like, and to not place all of our faith and hopes into things that are only temporary or simply feel good or look nice because what will hold up in the end is not the building or the institution but it's going to be you, and me, and our collective witness. Because whether there is a building or whether the world feels like it's coming to an end, God is still, always and everywhere, a God of love and resurrection who will not crumble and fall down, but will abide with us in and through it all. Again Thomas writes, "It is precisely now, when systemic evil and age old brokenness threaten to bring us to ruin that we have to testify without fear and without shame the Good News that is the Gospel."

By your endurance, you will gain your souls.

Friends, I think for many of us, the reality is that this has been an emotionally and spiritually exhausting few years. Enduring to have hope, enduring to live in kindness and joy, enduring to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God has been quite frankly, hard. We have been living in days and times where we have had to endure a lot, personally and for our community and the world.

Claiming the identity of Christian in these days boldly has not been easy, but the word that Christ proclaims in the midst of it all is that we are called to

endure and to testify. And as we think through a month of stewardship and what it is we invest of our time, talent and treasure, we have an opportunity to endure and testify together, in this Stone Church community, come what may.

If we all took a moment and think back on our own lives and what we've had to endure personally, I'm sure we all would have an interesting list...some good, some bad. As I was thinking back on my own life and the things I've had to endure, several things came to mind. But when I really thought about something I had to endure that I hated and wondered if it was really worth it, it was about SIX years ago when I gave birth to my beloved, beautiful, first child. Those of you who have known me that long, can you all believe it's already been 6 years ago? I want to name and acknowledge aloud that I know every woman's experience is different and that there are women who long to experience this. But really, for me, one of the hardest things I've ever had to endure in this life so far was hard labor for two nights without medication. Some of you are like, "Girl, you did that to yourself," I know. 😊 But I wanted to experience the fullness of what it would all mean, and boy did I. There was really a point where I wasn't sure if it was worth it-the waves of pain, even breathing through each contraction as I had practiced, all seemed futile at some point. In fact, it was Marion that at times had to take my face into his hands and remind me how to breathe.

Looking back and reflecting a little on that experience with you all now, I realize how much these days and these times we live in really is like a long labor. It comes with waves of pain as we continue to be bombarded by news of an aching world where terrible and hate-filled acts and retaliation are happening; waves of pain as people continue to literally go hungry, struggle with addiction, wonder how to stay housed; the list goes on and on. In the midst of all of that, we need someone to remind us to breathe, to keep going, and to believe that we must, because something beautiful can and will be birthed through it.

And so friends, the challenge today is that we are called to witness not only when things are shiny and beautiful and easy, because those things will be temporary, but Jesus is telling us we will be called to testify, to speak, to act, especially when things feel the most apocalyptic. When the birth pangs hurt the most. When you're wondering if it's even worth it. But the promise is that God will continue to hold us and remind us how to breathe and then to push through it. God will give us words and a wisdom and the promise that it will be worth it.

Because yes, if you are only keeping your eyes fixed upon a shiny temple to keep you sustained and going in your faith, it's going to crumble pretty fast. But if you can keep your eyes upon the living God and endure and see new life and hope in the midst of the despair, you will gain your souls.

These times that we are in are an opportunity to testify. If you are feeling helpless today, know that helping others is how you can turn some of that feeling around. It's not a fix for all, but a helping hand is a way to hold on to our humanity. And boy, do we need to cling to our humanity these days. We are called to endure.

So in this moment, Church...breathe...and as we walk out those doors, push. Do not fix your faith upon the shiny things that are temporary but see what and whom God sees. For what God births will not lead to desolation and ruin. Keep going. The birth pangs will end in joy. By our endurance, we will gain our souls. May it be so. And may we believe it. Amen.