

Luke 21:5-19 11/13/25 23 Pentecost Bill Uetracht

About two months before we moved here to Muskegon, I was running, as I often did, in one of Toledo's metro parks. While running, I got intense pain in my right knee, pain that stopped my running. Now the pain didn't come again, except if I ran. Initially, I could run an hour without pain, and then boom, it would hit. Soon it became 45 minutes. Then thirty. And then 15. Over ten years ago, I gave up running, even after having two surgeries to address the problem. I loved running. I miss it terribly. My heart sometimes sinks when I watch people run. Welcome to the world of the law of entropy, the law of deterioration.

Earlier this year, a visit to my primary care physician resulted in me being diagnosed with asthma. Frankly, I didn't believe the diagnosis, and the doctor was a bit surprised by it. I wanted further proof of the veracity of the diagnosis. So, I had some more elaborate testing, and sure enough, I have asthma. You know me. I have done almost all things right. I have been involved in endurance sports. I can hold my breath under water for a long time. I can sustain notes longer than most folks.

Welcome to the world of entropy, the movement toward deterioration. I don't appreciate it one bit. It threatens what I like to do. It challenges the ways that I have used to establish my identity, and frankly, the projects I have used to justify my life. But entropy didn't consult me. And for those of you who know the power of deterioration, you would probably say that entropy didn't consult you either.

Today's readings, especially the first reading from Malachi and the gospel reading from Luke are about deterioration. Malachi's

reading, frankly, is somewhat brutal. He tells us that the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and evildoers will be stubble, will disintegrate, not leaving anything that will enable life to regenerate.

Malachi surely is not having a good day. He pictures a time when the enemies of the faithful (those who revere the name of God) will get theirs, when they will be no more. Honestly, I don't find this overly helpful, but it's the gift of the lectionary today. I suppose the message is that you shouldn't live in a way that gives too much power to the arrogant and evil, which probably isn't bad advice. They, too, will disintegrate and disappear.

The gospel reading for today deals with the deterioration of the truly big thing, not simply in size, but in purpose and meaning. And that thing, of course, is the temple. In Luke, Jesus hangs out in the temple quite a bit. He was just in the temple watching a poor widow put in a couple of coins in one of the offering boxes. Now, at the prompting of some, he is reflecting on the nature of the temple and what is going to happen to it. The folks he is speaking to are overwhelmed by the beauty and the majesty of the temple. Wow! What great things people have done for God's sake. This temple is incredible!

"Ya, maybe," Jesus says. "But the day is coming when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." Even the prized temple will disintegrate.

Can you imagine what the listeners thought when they heard this disturbing comment? Can you image what Americans would say if they were to hear, "This American empire is going to deteriorate, become a part of the annals of history."? Oh no, we would respond.

Some things are eternal. Some things integral to our identity and our need to justify ourselves cannot disintegrate. No, Jesus is saying, even the temple will come and go.

As I was preparing for this sermon, I looked at the previous times I preached on this passage. And I discovered that this reading from Luke showed up shortly after 9-11. And I noted in the sermon I preached then, that the words about crumbling buildings were especially poignant. The twin towers of New York were deeply symbolic of the American economic system. Those who contributed to their becoming a pile of rubble were trying to say something about that system, were trying to knock it down. Ya, you are right, Jesus. The day is coming when not one stone will be left upon another, when all will be thrown down. And in some ways, that day has already come.

What we know about the Gospel of Luke is that it was likely written about 15 years after the destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. So, in other words, the day when one stone would not be left upon another had already come. But the problem was that Jesus didn't return, the Messiah didn't appear on the scene, as was anticipated by many of the Jesus followers. The tumbling of the temple was thought to be a clear sign of the arrival of the end. Luke's point, after the fact, is that a whole lot of stuff needed to happen before the end would occur. So for him, this is not the time for panic. Many things needed to happen first, but there is a whole lot more that must occur. All the crazy wars and insurrections, the social chaos will happen, but wait, there's more! Nation will rise against nation and kingdoms against kingdoms. There will be earthquakes, famines, and plagues, terrible things in the sky.

But wait there is more. You will be arrested and persecuted and handed over to synagogues and governors. You will be betrayed by parents, siblings, relatives, and friends. But don't give up. Don't throw in the towel because Jesus hasn't returned. A lot must happen before the end. We may indeed be in for the long haul.

Many people think that the Gospel of Luke was written in part to encourage people who were in it for the long haul and who perhaps were prepared to abandon the faith. I suppose we could say Luke may have been a manual for living out the faith for the long haul. It's interesting that in the Gospel of Luke the word "daily" is added to Jesus' call to pick up the cross and follow him. In Luke, we are to pick up the cross *daily*. This faith stuff is going to be a *daily* experience, a practice that will need to be repeated day after day for a long time. Perhaps Luke's gospel is a gospel for the meantime, the *mean . . .* time, the time that can be long and also mean.

We're living in such a time. We are living in a time between destruction and redemption. We are living in an ugly time, a time of entropy, a time when it is clear that life isn't always what it should be, when daily we are reminded of deterioration, of life's fragileness, and sometimes even its cruelty.

So, how do we live in such a time? What shall we do, as songwriter Ray Makeever asks, "between the times"? I think this is what Luke wants us to mess with. How do we live life when deterioration is real and the end seems far off?

The words of Luke's Jesus in response to that question are telling but also unsettling. As he speaks of the followers of Jesus being harassed by synagogues and governors, he says, "So make up

your minds not to prepare your defense in advance. You will be given what you need to say.”

What? Be intentional about not being prepared? Be intentional about not being defensive? Come on, now! Much of our life is about preparation and the control that comes from it. Much of our life is about defending. If we don’t map it all out, there’s going to be a big mess. Who is going to win the argument, if we don’t know what we are going to say in advance? Who is going to defend us if we don’t defend ourselves?

How do we live in light of deterioration and entropy? We live in trust. It is trust that will give us endurance for our souls.

In the midst of Jesus’ urging us toward trust, he speaks a word of gospel, good news. After he says, “You will be hated by all because of my name,” he claims: “But not a hair of your head will perish.”

I find the claim a bit comical because Jesus has just said to his disciples, “They will put some of you to death.” What’s the deal, then? Our hair lives on forever? What if we don’t have any? Oh, I suspect that Jesus’ words are a colorful way of saying that ultimately our lives are in God’s hands. Even in death our worth in the eyes of God is not taken away. Even in the midst of deterioration, we have eternal value in the heart and mind of God.

So, we don’t have to live by controlling everything. (Good luck with that anyway!) We don’t have to live anticipating, calculating everything, defending ourselves at every opportunity. We can live by trust.

Yes, deterioration, the rubble—they are real. But there is something truer than the rubble. Jesus’ life and body became

rubble. He was crucified. But the story didn't end there. God raised him from the dead. It ain't over until God speaks the last word, and the last word God speaks is life.