

“Built to Last”

“For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

In addition to it being festival season in Stratford, it appears that this is also demolition season in our city:

- The old King’s Buffet building on Ontario Street was recently torn down.
- The Legion Hall on St. Patrick Street is in the middle of demolition.
- The Tom Patterson Theatre, the Kiwanis Community Centre, the Lawn Bowling Club, and everything else on that block no longer stand as work has begun on the new festival theatre.

It’s another reminder to us that most things in life are not built to last.

St. Paul understood this reality both in his occupation and in his proclamation. Throughout his apostolic ministry, Paul supported himself by working as a tentmaker (*“Paul went to see [Aquila and Priscilla], and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together – by trade they were tentmakers.”* – Acts 18:2-3). While tents played an important role in many ancient cultures, especially among nomadic peoples, Paul knew that a tent by definition is temporary; tents are made to be put up and torn down repeatedly and have a very limited period of usefulness. Unlike many of the ancient structures that stand to this day, none of Paul’s tents lasted beyond his own life, because a tent is not built to last.

It’s not surprising that Paul would use this familiar image of a tent in describing human existence and the fragility and impermanence of humanity. As he has previously described the people God calls into mission as “jars of clay” (2 Corinthians 4:7) that are also not built to last, he compares all that is related to humanity as an *“earthly tent”* that in time will crumble and perish. Paul’s use of *“earthly tent”* could refer to many things:

- The Hebrew Tabernacle or tent of meeting, the portable earthly dwelling place of God amongst the children of Israel from the time of the Exodus from Egypt through the conquering of the land of Canaan (*“And have them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them. In accordance with all that I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.”* – Exodus 25:8-9).
- The physical body of individuals, the *“outer nature [that] is wasting away”* (2 Corinthians 4:16).
- The Jerusalem Temple that Jesus declares will be replaced by one *“not made with hands”* (*“I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.”* – Mark 14:58).

Human existence is defined by impermanence, by the reality that nothing is built to last, that *“everything dies, baby, that’s a fact”* (Bruce Springsteen).

But Paul’s reflection on the fragility and finitude of human existence is not meant to create feelings of despair among his readers. Instead, it is a means by which Paul compares what human beings create vs. what is created by God. In the face of the limited nature of all things – including our own lives – Paul steers his readers to the hope found in *“eternal things”*: *“For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”* (5:1). Paul’s confidence is grounded in his faith *“that is in accordance with scripture”* (4:13), that God who raised Jesus from the dead *“will raise us also with Jesus and will bring us with you into his presence”* (4:14). While all that is human is impermanent and will one day be destroyed, all that is related to God is eternal and endures forever:

- “The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.” – Isaiah 40:7-8.

At the heart of the Gospel that Paul proclaims is the assurance that those who are baptized into Christ are baptized into his death and resurrection, and therefore as Christ overcame the power of death those who are in Christ are born anew to this living hope:

- “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” – Romans 6:3-5.
- “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive with Christ.” – 1 Corinthians 15:20-22.

At the center of the Gospel that Paul proclaims is the Apostle’s affirmation of God’s grace, by which Paul means God’s freely-given, unmerited gift of new life in Christ: *“Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.”* (4:15). The goal of human life, transformed by God’s grace, is to glorify God, give thanks to God, and to bless God:

- “May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” – Romans 15:5-6.
- “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” – 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.
- “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.” – 2 Corinthians 1:3-4.

It is because of this confidence that is rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ that Paul can encourage the Corinthians to join with him in declaring *“so we do not lose heart”* (4:16). Afflictions are a part of the life of faith, but they are not a reason for Christians to despair or grow weary; instead, they are to be seen as signposts that one is proceeding as should be expected (*“... no one would be shaken by these persecutions. Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for. In fact, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecutions; so it turned out, as you know.”* – 1 Thessalonians 3:3-4). Not only are appearances misleading, but they are also temporary; whereas the unseen things are eternal: *“...for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”* (4:18).

- “Because Christ was raised from the dead, believers who are one with Christ and who have died with Christ and shared his sufferings already have newness of life and are assured that, at the end times, they will have a resurrection like his: *“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”* (Philippians 3:10-11).” – J. Paul Sampley.

The demolition of a building involves more than bricks and mortar, steel and concrete; it also includes memories that are associated with those structures. A restaurant may have been a place where a family gathered to celebrate a birthday or an anniversary, and its destruction brings to mind people whose lives have also ended. A community hall may have been a place where friends gathered, many of whom are not gone

from our sight. A theatre may have been where a husband and wife had their first date, and the surviving spouse is reminded of the grief experienced at the death of her beloved whose life was as impermanent as that now-demolished building. The passing of these places in our lives and community are a reminder that *“time, like an ever-rolling stream, bears all our years away; they fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day”* (ELW Hymn 632).

One of the places that no longer exist from my life story is my home congregation, the place where I was ordained 35 years ago this week. Unlike the buildings that are being demolished here in Stratford, the building that housed St. Peter’s still stands, but the congregation ceased to exist nine years ago. The fate of my home congregation is like that of many churches, including several in our Nith Valley Ministry Area who are facing the reality that their life as a community of faith may be drawing to an end. It is a painful moment for congregations, especially for people whose lives have been centered on ministries and life passages that taken place within these assemblies. The uncertain future of these congregations often causes people to question the future of the Christian faith itself, whether or not the Gospel of Jesus Christ will survive for future generations.

While none of us have any certainty that any congregation will survive indefinitely, all Christians share the confidence that the Church of Jesus Christ will endure forever. Yes, some individual congregations will go the way of the old theatre, but because it is our Lord who established the Church we can share Paul’s confidence that what Christ has established is not an “earthly tent” but a “building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

- “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” – Matthew 16:16
- “... so that we may not despair but may know that the church will nevertheless remain; so that we may know that however great the multitude of the ungodly is, nevertheless the church exists and Christ bestows those gifts that he promised to the church: forgiveness of sins, answered prayer, the gift of the Holy Spirit.” – Apology of the Augsburg Confession.
- “The true treasure of the church is the Holy Gospel of the glory and the grace of God.” – Martin Luther, *95 Theses*, Thesis #62.

“The Church of Christ, in every age beset by change but Spirit-led must claim and test its heritage and keep on rising from the dead.” – ELW Hymn 729.

As sad as it may be to see familiar buildings being torn down, what is destroyed is often the first step for new construction that brings great benefits to a community. As sad as it was to witness the closing of my home congregation, I know that its ministry continues in the lives of many of its people (myself included) who continue to bless others because of the blessings we received during the life of St. Peter’s. we pray that God will use us as the “jars of clay” and “earthly tents” that are the chosen vessels through which the Gospel of Jesus Christ is brought to others during our lifespan, knowing that the blessings that God bestows upon all people will far outlast the time of our service. While our witness as human messengers of God’s grace is limited, the blessings of the Church of Jesus Christ are limitless and will continue to be a blessing to future generations because our eternal Lord will continue to gather people in new ways to share the eternal message of the steadfast love of God in our Lord Jesus Christ. The Church will continue to exist *“for the sake of the message that it bears, namely the message entrusted to the original apostles, which must continually be proclaimed by new messengers.”* (Douglas John Hall).

“May the witness of the people who have ministered in the name of Jesus Christ through this congregation be undiminished and continue as they leave this place.” – Service of Leave-Taking, *Occasional Services for the Assembly*.

Earthly tents – even buildings made of stone – are by definition temporary, as is everything that is created by or associated with humanity. But it is through these earthly tents and jars of clay that God chooses to share the eternal message of God’s steadfast love with others. That is the mission of the Church of Jesus Christ that will continue long after these earthly tents with which we are familiar have ceased to exist. While we may mourn their passing, we share the faith of our ancestors who brought the Gospel to the people of their age that *“those who believed in Jesus as Lord expected in the age to come a transformation of their own bodies and a renewal of the body of the community, the body of Christ.”* (Cynthia Briggs Kittridge). The earthly tent we live in will one day be destroyed, but the *“house of living stones”* into which Christ has built us so that the Church will continue to be *“a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, so that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”* (1 Peter 2:9).

Our earthly tents may fade away – but the Church that is built on Christ the solid rock is built to last! Amen.