

November 13, 2022
Luke 21:5-19

Pentecost 23
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Built to Last”

“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.”

Pennsylvania Station in New York was by all accounts an awe-inspiring building. Built by the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1910, the station covered eight acres in the heart of midtown Manhattan and was considered a masterpiece of the Beaux-Arts style and one of the great architectural works of New York City. Its exterior was marked by colonnades of Roman columns modeled after such landmarks as the Acropolis in Athens, Greece. Other parts of the station were modeled after St. Peter’s Square in Vatican City, the Bank of England headquarters in London, and the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. Four sculptures by Adolph Weinman flanked large clocks on the top of each side of the building; these sculptures were accompanied by stone eagles placed around the station’s exterior. The station contained eleven platforms serving twenty-one tracks for trains arriving from New Jersey in the west and Long Island in the east, carrying millions of passengers into this spectacular building each year. It is no wonder that *The New York Times* called Penn Station “the largest building in the world ever built at one time.”

Over the years I have taken the train into New York City on numerous occasions, but sadly I never had the opportunity to experience the grandeur of Pennsylvania Station. Passenger rail traffic began to decline after World War II, and in the 1950s the Pennsylvania Railroad sold the air rights to the property. Starting in 1963, the spectacular station was demolished to make way for Madison Square Garden. While its demolition sparked the modern historic preservation movement, the loss of this incredible edifice serves as a reminder that even the most magnificent buildings are vulnerable to the ravages of time; not even the grand Pennsylvania Station was built to last.

All of us have memories of buildings from our past that we thought would stand forever but were lost to the realities of change, often in the name of progress. I remember buildings in my hometown that were awe-inspiring as a child, built with large stones and impressive furnishings that I thought would last forever; but these buildings exist today only in my memory. Among these buildings that have gone the way of Pennsylvania Station were some large church buildings where congregations

gathered for worship for generations. They were built by faithful persons who gave generously to create houses of worship that included beautiful furnishings, inspiring stained-glass windows, magnificent pipe organs, and sacred spaces that enhanced the worship experience for their assemblies. But not even the greatest of these church buildings was immune to the ravages of time; many of them fell victim to changing demographics and the resulting decline in the congregations' ability to maintain such large structures. Their loss is a reminder of the reality of which we sing, that the church that is built on a rock "*shall stand, even when steeples are falling; crumbled have spires in every land ...*" (ELW Hymn 652).

The Jerusalem Temple that is the setting for today's Gospel lesson was also a most impressive building. While the original Temple built by Solomon had been destroyed centuries earlier, this building had recently been refurbished by Herod the Great, who spared no expense in its construction. The rebuilding project had taken eighty years to complete and included new foundation walls through which Herod had significantly enlarged the Temple. He employed the most talented artisans to use the best materials for the project such as white marble that was up to sixty-seven feet long, twelve feet high and twelve feet wide. Blue, scarlet, and white Babylonian tapestries made of the finest linen formed a veil at the entrance, and gold and silver-plated doors were installed throughout the building. The Jewish historian Josephus provides us with an eyewitness account of the grandeur that was the Jerusalem Temple:

- "The sacred edifice itself, the holy temple, in the central position, was approached by a flight of twelve steps. The façade was of equal height and breadth, each being a hundred cubits; but the building behind was narrower by forty cubits, for in front it had as it were shoulders extending twelve cubits on either side. The first gate was seventy cubits high and twenty-five broad and had no doors, displaying unexcluded the void expanse of heaven; the entire face was covered with gold ... 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."

These descriptions of the Temple help us understand the reactions of the crowds who had gathered there in Jesus' presence: "*When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God*" (Luke 21:5). This unidentified crowd reacted to the magnificence of the Temple with the same awe that people feel when they encounter any grand structure; but one person present at

the Temple has a different reaction to it. Jesus quickly reminds those who are so taken by the grandeur of the Temple that as spectacular as it may appear, it will not remain standing for long: *“As for these things that you see, the days will come when no one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”* (21:6). Jesus’ words echo his earlier warning about the destruction of the Temple (*“They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.”* – 19:44). While we know from history that the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, this news must have been shocking to this crowd. How could it be possible that something so beautiful, so massive and awe-inspiring, about to be so totally destroyed? But even though the news must have been shocking to his audience, Jesus’ followers do not ask him how he knew about the Temple’s imminent demise. Instead, they ask him *“Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?”* (21:7). This exchange between Jesus and his followers attests to their belief that Jesus had been sent by God; *“therefore, if Jesus said the Temple was going to be destroyed, it was a done deal. They just wanted to know when to expect such an event.”* (Debra J. Mumford). While Jesus had never said anything about a “sign” of the Temple’s destruction, his audience assumes that there must be one. The Old Testament prophets had identified signs that would signal that the destruction or deliverance of Jerusalem was imminent:

- *“And this shall be a sign for you: this year you shall eat what grows of itself, and in the second year what springs from that; then in the third year sow, reap, plant vineyards, and eat their fruit. The surviving remnant of the house of Judah shall again take root downwards, and bear fruit upwards; for from Jerusalem a remnant shall go out, and from Mount Zion a band of survivors. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.”* – 2 Kings 19:29-31.

Josephus reports that preceding the destruction of the Temple there were various signs to warn the people of its destruction, but they chose instead to trust in the false prophets who reassured them that all was well:

- *“Thus it was that the wretched people were deluded at that time by charlatans and pretended messengers of the deity; while they neither heeded nor believed in the manifest portents that foretold the coming destruction ... Reflecting on these things one will find that God has a care for men, and by all kinds of premonitory signs shows His people the way of salvation.”*

Rather than describe the signs that would precede and confirm the destruction he foresaw, Jesus issues a series of three warnings about the appearance of false messiahs and false calculators of time and place; wars, tumults, and international conflicts; and natural disasters with cosmic terror. The coming to conclusion of God's purpose will affect not only Israel but all nations and the entire cosmos; "*there is no area of God's creation so remote as to be unaffected by God's fulfillment of the divine intention.*" (Fred Craddock). To be "led astray" (*planao*) encompasses being led to sin, being taught false teachings, and being deceived regarding apocalyptic events, warnings that Paul frequently issued in his letters:

- "Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived!" – 1 Corinthians 6:9.
- "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow." – Galatians 6:7.

Deception is often characterized in the New Testament as the work of false prophets ("*Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray.*" – Matthew 24:10-11). The claim by these false prophets that "*I am he!*" is couched in the revelatory formula *ego eimi*, as in the messianic claim that "*I am the Messiah!*" (Matthew 24:5). The references to various false prophets at this time confirm the necessity of Jesus' warning:

- "For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared. After him Judas the Galilean rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered." – Acts 5:36-37.

The other claim of the false prophets will be that "*the time is near!*" which was spoken first by Jesus himself at the beginning of his ministry ("*From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'*" – Matthew 4:17). These false prophets will point to wars and uprisings as signs of the end times; such conflicts were always times of terror and were often mentioned as signs of apocalyptic times ("*But reports from the east and the north shall alarm him, and he shall go out with great fury to bring ruin and complete destruction to many.*" – Daniel 11:44). Jesus instructs his followers not to be terrified by these developments; in God's providence they are necessary, and moreover they do not signal that the end is near. Disciples are not to be so preoccupied with these events as to be terrified or

led astray; the important thing for them to keep in mind is that this will be a time of witnessing, a *“call to faithful witness under unusual stress and pain.”* (Craddock). Jesus’ words foreshadow the arrests and trials that will be reported in the book of Acts, when many of Jesus’ followers will experience the fulfillment of Jesus’ warning that *“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”* (21:12). The persecution of the disciples does not exceed what Jesus himself will experience, who fulfills Isaiah’s prophecy of the Suffering Servant who was *“wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and with his bruises we were healed.”* (Isaiah 53:5). Hatred, betrayal by relatives and friends, and even death awaits them: *“You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name.”* (21:16-17). The prediction of betrayal by family members echoes the warning of the prophet Micah of a time when *“the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; your enemies are members of your own household.”* (Micah 7:6). Jesus himself will be betrayed by a friend (Judas Iscariot) and put to death, so again he experiences the full measure of the trials that are about to fall on his followers. Virtually every detail of Jesus’ warnings here foreshadows the work of the disciples in Acts; *“the fulfillment of these predictions serves to confirm both Jesus’ sovereign authority and the divine necessity of the persecutions experienced by the early Christians.”* (Alan Culpepper).

But Jesus’ warnings are also accompanied by a promise of divine protection and divine empowerment to witness under these harsh circumstances. They need not worry about preparing their defense in advance, *“for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict”* (21:15), a promise that was fulfilled when the Lord encouraged the Apostle Paul to *“keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome.”* (Acts 23:11). Faithfulness and endurance under threat, under arrest, and under the penalty of death are qualities of disciples during this time of witnessing; the disciples of Christ will not be exempt from the suffering that our Lord himself experienced. But as death was not the end for our Lord, who rose again so that even death cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, so also does Jesus promise his disciples that the suffering they endure will not cause irreparable harm, for *“not a hair of your head will perish”* (21:18), and assurance of divine protection that occurs in various places in the Old Testament:

- “As the LORD lives, not one hair of his head shall fall to the ground; for he has worked with God today.” – 1 Samuel 14:45.
- “Then she said, ‘Please, may the king keep the LORD your God in mind, so that the avenger of blood may kill no more; and my son not be destroyed.’ He said, ‘As the LORD lives, not one hair of your son shall fall to the ground.’” – 2 Samuel 14:11
- “So Solomon replied, ‘If he proves to be a worthy man, not one of his hairs shall fall to the ground; but if wickedness is found in him, he shall die.’” – 1 Kings 1:52.

The reason Jesus warns his disciples about the coming trials is so that they may be prepared to endure them faithfully, for *“by your endurance you will gain your souls”* (21:19). Endurance does not mean passive waiting; it is more akin to perseverance than patience, as those who are like the good soil, *“the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.”* (8:15). *“Such discipleship will require endurance, but the result is that one gains life.”* (Culpepper).

In this month in which we remember *“all the saints who from their labours rest,”* we also remember that many of these saints experienced the sufferings, betrayals, and martyrdoms that Jesus describes. Many endured the heartache of being rejected by those they loved, of having their homes taken away from them, watching as the magnificent buildings they erected for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ destroyed. But we need to remember that even though the magnificent Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, neither Judaism nor Christianity perished along with it. The rock upon which the Church of Jesus Christ is built is not a house made of stones; it is a house of living stones into which God’s people have been built, *“built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ”* (1 Peter 2:5). Houses of worship may not stand the test of time, but the Church of Jesus Christ is built to last:

- “It is also taught that at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.” – *Augsburg Confession*, Article VII.

Buildings as spectacular as the Jerusalem Temple and Pennsylvania Station may no longer exist, but the mission and purpose of the Church of Jesus Christ continues. We are *“a house of living stone, we are his own habitation.”* (ELW Hymn 652).

Even in times of suffering and loss, we have Christ's assurance that nothing will separate us from the love of our Lord and Saviour, who triumphed over the powers of sin, death and the power of the devil "*in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.*" (Small Catechism).

Church buildings may disappear, but the Church of Jesus Christ, the gathering of God's beloved who continue to worship and serve in Jesus' name, is built to last!

Amen.