

23 Pentecost
Christ and Grace
Robin Teasley

Isaiah 65:17-25, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13, Luke 21:5-19
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We are coming to the close of the church year; in fact, next week is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of Pentecost. In the church we get a head start on celebrating the new year, which begins on the first Sunday of Advent. It's appropriate then, to reflect on end times as we anticipate what will come next, which is what we hear in our readings. We hear of new heavens and a new earth from Isaiah, we hear of tension in the Thessalonian community as they became anxious in waiting for the return of Christ, and in the Gospel, Jesus tells of the temple's destruction – "the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." Can you feel the tension between what was and what will be? Do you hear the certainty that things will pass away but that there will be newness of life to follow?

When I taught preschool the careful, methodical, planning children would delight in building perfect structures out of those large, lightweight, cardboard blocks. They would build them up as high as they could reach, standing on their tiptoes. Without fail, there was always one little daredevil who took the greatest delight in racing headlong into the structure, sending every block tumbling down! Often this produced weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth from the builder of the masterpiece.

There is such trauma in that moment of destruction, but as children we were so much better at shaking it off, starting over, and finding a new thing to create. In our passage from Isaiah we hear that God "is about to create new heavens and a new earth". As adults we are, how should I say this, not quite as flexible about having the old thrown down and accepting the new!

The Church likes to talk about things being made new. We think that by talking about it enough, maybe we will actually believe it – or maybe even do it! But we fool ourselves! The reality in the Church is that we generally do not like new things!

It would be just fine if the Church stuck with replacing only those things that *we* want replaced. There's always something we want made new. It's the things *other* people want made new that we have such a hard time with! "All things made new" can be an unsettling scriptural theme to hear. Most of us have a certain idea or image of what church and religion mean to us. We definitely do not want that to change. That image is what we inwardly long for when we show up Sunday after Sunday. That image may be what we think we had some time long ago but more often than not our memory is selective or inaccurate. And it's that remembered image, which can sometimes prevent us from experiencing God.

Rev. Sam Candler, dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip in Atlanta, has said, "Do you know what prevents you from experiencing God the most? The biggest obstacle in the way of your experiencing God is whatever your last experience of God was." Your last experience, whatever

it was, was so wonderful and refreshing and renewing, that you inevitably believe that every future experience will have to be exactly like that. And it won't be.¹

When we feel safe and comfortable in whatever temple we have constructed, we don't want to hear about how it could be different or better. Whether it's behavior patterns in our personal lives or management policies at work, and Lord help us remember the new passwords they continually make us create, we would prefer to just keep things like they are. You can't teach old dogs new tricks, we say, or better the devil you know than the devil you don't!

All of us, no matter how old we are, have some sort of temple that we have built, that we admire and protect. Some temples are not good for us, and some are not all bad. But every one of those temples will, one day, be made new, and it can be painful for us to see it fall. Usually we must learn the hard way, by losing something. Loss often serves the purpose of making us pay attention, making us observe and notice the truth, sometimes for the first time. Yes, all things are being made new all the time, if we are watching.

Some of you may remember Bill's Barbecue in Richmond. It was our favorite – much like the revered King's Barbeque here in Petersburg. I spent many a lunchtime at Bill's with my grandmother. We sat in the car at the drive in, and they would bring us sandwiches, fries, fountain Cokes and the best thing of all, chocolate icebox pie. I have treasured memories of time spent with my grandmother when I was a child, eating lunch from the tray attached to the car. But Bill's has been gone for a long time now - there's an empty lot where the building once was. Not one stone left upon another. Yes, there was a first reaction of pain and sadness. But then I realized that even though there was not one stone left, my memories are still there. All the love, all the things my grandmother taught me about life as we shared our lunch, remain. And those memories, taken together with the other events in my life are the building blocks that God is using to create new life for me and for those I love.

Jesus knew the temple would fall. Jesus knows that all the material things with which we surround ourselves, fill ourselves, protect ourselves, are just that - material things that will not last. All our habits and traditions and rituals are not the source of our faith. The temple's destruction would not mean the end of God's creation; it would not mean the end of salvation.

Signs of destruction are all around us, all the time. School shootings, storms, fires, political dissent, broken relationships, disease – no doubt each one of us here today is dealing with some form of destruction in our lives. But that will not be the end. Christ is the sure foundation of our lives through every change, at every ending and every new beginning. God is about to create new heavens and a new earth. In the assurance of this promise we can sing with Isaiah -

Surely, it is God who saves me; *
I will trust in him and not be afraid.
For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, *
and he will be my Savior. Amen.

¹ The Very Rev. Sam Candler http://day1.org/2380-all_will_be_thrown_down other portions of this sermon also inspired by Sam Candler.