**Sermon for Nov 17, 23rd Sunday after Pentecost Yr. C, Luke 21:5-19**

**Written by Rev. Ingrid Chenoweth**

In California, people every day are faced with the urgent summons to evacuate their neighborhoods because of the threat of wildfire. After hearing the announcement over the radio or seeing the alert on their cell phones, they grab their car keys and then scan the house asking themselves the heart-wrenching question – what do we have to bring, that we can’t afford to lose to fire? What must we take with us because we can’t take the risk of losing it forever?

What would you take from your house if you had to evacuate? Important documents for sure. But then what? Photo albums? A beloved painting? A serving dish or piece of jewelry that was handed down to by grandparents?

If we have such things, we can count our blessings. My parents loved collecting antiques, in part because when they left their home in Estonia in 1940 they couldn’t take anything with them that couldn’t carry. The farther from home they traveled the less they had; anything they had was either sold to buy food or pay a train fare, or stolen by other desperate people as they fled ahead of Stalin’s Red Army. Once they finally made it to Australia through a refugee program, they had nothing from their old lives except loved ones and memories.

 Change is hard. When things change around us, it’s hard to let go of those things that we have learned to rely on. There’s always grief when we have to let go of something or someone we love or that made us feel safe. Detective writer Raymond Chandler says this succinctly: “To say goodbye is to die a little.” But those of us who are followers of Jesus have the resources we need to navigate loss.

 In our Gospel passage from Luke for today, Jesus is equipping his disciples – and the generations who will follow them – to handle the massive change they’ll see in their lifetimes. Just 40 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection the world of Jews and Jewish Christians would be upended in chaos and destruction.

For Jews through the first century AD, the Temple mount in Jerusalem was the center of the world. It was also central to their identity, essential to what it was to be Jewish. The Temple in Jerusalem was the place where God had promised to show up. They knew God was present in the Holy of Holies. That was such a holy space that the High Priest who entered the Holy of Holies once a year went in with a rope tied around his waist, in case he might be overwhelmed by God’s presence and not survive the experience.

The disciples knew the huge Temple mount foundation – spanning six football fields – was unmovable, and that the Temple rising from it, shining with gold and polished bronze and white marble, would be there forever. For them and their children and their children’s children, they were sure that the Temple would continue to be the center of the world. The Temple was the tangible reassurance that God would always be with God’s people.

They knew that the Temple would be forever, but they were wrong. It must have shocked them to their core to hear Jesus predict that the Temple would be destroyed. Not only was it incomprehensible that Roman military might could tear the stones – some weighing hundreds of ***tons*** – one from another, but it was also impossible to imagine God abandoning them and the Temple in which God dwelled.

And yet, in the year 70 AD in the devastation of the first Jewish-Roman War, that’s just what happened. Roman forces reduced the magnificent Temple to a pile of rubble. Even the huge retaining walls of the Temple Mount foundation were torn apart, except for the foundation’s western retaining wall which still stands. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus says that over a million Jewish people were slaughtered. It felt to the Jewish people as if all that they had clung to, the center of their very identity as chosen people of God, was gone. It’s almost impossible for us to imagine how devastating this loss must have been.

But often in God’s world, when something dies, new life - resurrection life - is born in its place. Jesus warned the disciples not to place all their faith in the Temple as the locus of God’s presence for God’s people. God had something far better in mind. God’s presence would be for them not in a building made of rigid stone, but in a human being, a living Person, with a voice that made God’s love so clear even little children could understand. God in a living Person with hands that could hold and heal. With a warm human heart, full of compassion. Feet ready to travel far and wide to seek out those who needed most to meet him.

Jesus spent his life showing his followers that to know God and to be in God’s presence, all they had to was draw near to him. Even though they endured separation from their Lord during those terrible hours between Good Friday and Easter morning, Easter dawn came with the glorious realization that Jesus was sill with them. He could not be held by the stone door of his tomb or the locked doors of the upper room. He was alive and present with his disciples in ways they couldn’t have imagined before. The torn curtain of the Holy of Holies in the Temple was evidence that God would no longer be contained in the Temple but was now loose in the world like the untamable wind.

At Pentecost they learned that Jesus was within them as well. Through the Spirit, Jesus was present in the men and women and children who believed in him and who were baptized. All the believers had to do to be near their Lord was to come together with other believers to worship and to serve. Wherever they found themselves, from North Africa to Europe to Asia, whether in a marketplace or in a prison cell, when they were with other believers, they were with Jesus.

The longer we follow Jesus, the closer we walk with him, the more we learn that Jesus’ gift to us of himself is all we need. Shortly after teaching his disciples the Lord’s prayer, Luke relates that Jesus reassured the disciples that they could rely on God. In Luke 11 Jesus says:

Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! (Luke 11:11-13).

The Holy Spirit, Jesus’ Spirit, is the gift that contains with in it all good things. We learn that Jesus is our source of life, of joy, of wisdom, of all God’s good gifts. He is the source of all we need to navigate this world of loss and change, of death and resurrection life.

 So this week as we face our own individual and community losses and changes, occasions for grief and for joy, may we find that peace that only God can give. Because no matter what the circumstances of life might take from your hands, *nothing*, absolutely *nothing* will be able to take you out of Jesus’ hands. As Paul writes in Romans 8:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? … No… I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35, 38-39)

Amen.