

Sermon for the Sunday after the Ceiling Crashed July 21 2024

I went to the pride of Carbondale, the Farmer's Market at Murdale early yesterday to get the pick of the flowers for our altar, and while packing up I met an excellent dog, a mix between the full sized poodle and the Australian shepherd. Sooo much energy. I hunkered down and played with her. And my spirit sung with joy. It's not strictly an orthodox teaching, but I reckon the dog is God's holy unction, a true spiritual healing gift for homo sapiens, his other beloved, but rather shy, sad and lonely creatures. Until then I hadn't paid attention to my feelings about our parish's prospects without a "proper" sanctuary. It's similar to a death in the family. Whoever is appointed or anointed to lead the family through the valley of the shadow, defers to everyone else's grief in order to keep the family together and functioning.

Back about 3 or 4 decades ago our amazing cat, Chloe, who had born with us through alcoholism and recovery, through at least three moves, Chloe, the pet who slept on your heart when it was weary, had to be put down. That year I had buried almost a dozen old dears from the small church. It was like a holocaust. And I bore up to stay "non-anxious" and resurrection conscious through that world shaking time. I held Chloe while our Vet gave her the fatal injection. Paid the woman at the desk, got in my car and drove out into the Iowa cornfields, to where no one was around and cried my heart out for about an hour. I cried for everyone we had lost and for their families and for our church family. And then I cried another half hour, for myself, because, yes, my whole world changed shape too, and nothing was how it was supposed to be, nor, perhaps, ever again would be.

Since then I've been praying about whether to decree that all dogs are service animals, and maybe cats too, and invite them to join us here for Holy Eucharist. Dogs don't worry much about ceilings. They are very interested in who is there, with them. They are always ready to play. They are also very interested in the ground underfoot. It is hallowed ground, all. Hallowed by generations of love and worship.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, make this a temple of your presence and a house of prayer. Be always near us when we seek you in this place. Draw us to you, when we come alone and when we come with others, to find comfort and wisdom, to be supported and strengthened, to rejoice and give thanks. May it be here, Lord Christ, that we are made one with you and with one another, so that our lives are sustained and sanctified for your service. Amen

Now, I promise this won't be one of those sermons where I list all the woes of the whole world, but I do need to confess I have days in which despair is licking at my feet like a flame. I defiantly refuse to be burned, but at the same time, I have yet to find a vision statement, or a life coach, or a 5-year plan, or a lifestyle change, or a miracle medicine, or a meditation app that is an effective remedy for fear, anxiety, grief and regret.

But I HAVE found parts of my Christian faith that actually bring the goods and I really need to remind myself of those things right now.

There's a weird little scene in the Gospels that always comes to mind when I am anxious about how nothing seems to be working anymore, and the robots are coming for us and institutions that I never thought to doubt before – I don't know, like, DEMOCRACY are starting to crumble. I mean, God bless America, but this situation is showing it's fault lines.

But then there's this story where Jesus' disciples are chilling, outside the temple:

As Jesus was leaving the temple, after confounding his enemies once more, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!"

"Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; everything will be thrown down...."

And then he says,

"And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs."

Um, his poor disciples did nothing but comment on how beautiful their temple was - the gold and especially the large stones - and then boom, Jesus is all destruction and dreadful portents about it like he for sure didn't take his meds that morning.

I wonder: What temples am I so reliant upon still standing in my own life? What must remain unchanged in order for me to still feel hopeful... maybe my own able-bodiedness...or the health and safety of my children or the longevity of my relationships. What are my temples that while they stand I am good and God is good, but if they fall I have nothing left but despair?

It's always tempting to say that our lives are good because God is good, but then when the bottom falls out -- or the top falls down -- what are we left with? I mean, when we think that good things happen to people who God cares about and bad things happen to people on God's hit list, that's just a little problematic. Try preaching that kind of nonsense to the congregation I serve here on Friday nights. It doesn't hold water. Watch out for such nonsense.

Anyhow, Jesus was right, of course...the temple his disciples were so impressed by -- literally a wonder of the world -- actually was destroyed in 70 AD, but it wasn't God who destroyed it. It was Rome.

Because – it ends up – Jesus was right. Wars will happen. There will be destruction, and famine . . . there will be pandemics and fake news and the Left Behind series of books. There will be family trouble, there will be illness, there will be natural disaster, and you will hit 50 and your metabolism will slow waaay down like it took an early retirement. All of this will happen. All of it is real. And none of it is a sign of God's absence. Nor is any of it in your control. You cannot stop gravity. Some days you can't even manage the damage.

Which is a real affront to popular notions of wellness and so called spirituality these days...where there is a billion dollar industry convincing us that we can “manifest” everything we might want or need, that we can pray or power-of-positive-thinking our way into never getting a cancer diagnosis or needing financial help – these ideas are just smeared all over us and I get it.

I get the appeal. Powerlessness is terrifying. But what about when the thing happens in our life, in our churches, in our society that no amount of Purpose Driven drivel could ever have prevented? Maybe when the large stones of the temples we built to health, wealth, security and happiness crumble, that is the very moment to listen to sweet Jesus of Nazareth even more closely. If we do, we might hear him say: Do not be afraid. Because these things may rock your world, but they cannot harm your soul. These things may bring suffering but they need not bring hopelessness.

Which brings me to why I think scripture can be helpful in times of anxiety.

Because being a people with a sacred text is about knowing that we are a very small part of a very big story. And having that big and that old of a story gives us an important perspective.

Because when all we can see and feel and think about is the personal and political flak that's flying right now, it's good to remember that we are a people of an old, old story; one that starts at the beginning of time, brushes the skin of the present and reaches into a promised future. And the promise that God is not done and we will not be left alone still holds. This hope is not a naive hope. Nor is it an escapist hope. But quite the opposite. It's the hope of people who have heard the dangerous rumor that there is life beyond death and there is a hope beyond suffering.

During the pandemic, I was at a zoom conference on “unprecedented hope” and I really struggled with what to say – then I realized that my struggle with knowing what to say about unprecedented hope was not about the hope part after all – it was about the “unprecedented” part. Because for it to be a hope on which I can truly rely, it has to be a hope for which there is indeed a precedent. It has to be a hope that has been worn smooth by the tears and prayers and struggle of our ancestors in faith, through Sarah's laughter, and Hagar's stumbling steps and Mary's labor, through Abraham's obedience, with Isaac's fearful burden, and Joseph's dreams. For it to be a hope in which I can trust, it cannot be unprecedented.

Those who have come before us have already lived through pandemics and social upheaval and political nightmare, and

congregational conflict, and loss and grief and death and labor pains. Which means we are never alone in our struggles. Not really.

This is the bonkers thing we people of faith do. We say that our hope is not in the Dow Jones but in the God of Abraham and Sarah, our hope is not in the government but in the God of Jeremiah and Maria Magdalena; our hope is not in the non-profit bureaucracy or the bottom-line, consumer-industrial complex but in the God of Martha and Mary and Lazarus of Bethany, in the God of Teresa of Avila and Theresa of Calcutta, in the God of Abraham, Martin and John.

And, just to be clear, our hope is not ever in our ability to be hopeful. It is not in our ability to get anything right whatsoever. Our hope is in the God of Jonah, who got it all sassy backwards, and the God of Peter and Thomas, who were loved in spite of themselves. Because, foundationally, we are a people of a story. And it is through this story (and not through cable news and doom-scrolling) that we get to view ourselves and others and even history itself.

And as an anxious people, here's what I want you to hear today - When we stand in this big of a story - with one hand reaching back to the hope of the prophets and one hand reaching forward to the promises of God -- we can stand firmly in the reality of the present and not have that reality consume us. This is what is great about being people of faith. Because even in the midst of social chaos, infrastructure failure, and political turmoil and fear

and hate and uncertainty we can stand here in the reality of the present and confess that the story is still being written. The story of God and God's people is written in the lives of our ancestors and it is written in the future of our children and our children's children. It is being written on the tablets of our broken and healed hearts.

By this time next year, the story of the falling ceiling will be archived in best loved tales of how the Holy, Mischievous Spirit of Christ fell upon our church and did a wonderful new thing at St Andrew's, demonstrating in no uncertain terms that the household of God is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. [Ephesians 2:20]

No one gets to scare us into believing something else.

In other words, despite our anxieties, as people of faith, we still dare to get our hopes up. We dare to pray.

Lord God, hear us. Sanctify this Table dedicated to you. Let it be to us a sign of the heavenly Altar where your saints and angels praise you for ever. Accept here the continual recalling of the sacrifice of your Son. Grant that all who eat and drink at this holy Table may be fed and refreshed by his flesh and blood, be forgiven for their sins, united with one another, and

strengthened for your service.

Blessed be your Name, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; now
and for endless ages. Amen