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Emanuel's Ev. Lutheran Church, Bellevue (Pittsburgh), PA
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Malachi 4:1-2a
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13
Luke 21:5-19

Trials of the flesh

Our gospel lesson starts with the disciples making comments like I often hear at Emanuel's. "Our temple is beautiful" – there's certainly was, and so is ours. We often honor God by blessing beautiful gifts and by celebrating the beauty that we see. Maybe it's the beauty of creation at camp, or the beauty of sacred spaces like Emanuel's, or the beautiful relationships in a community.

Jesus did not join the compliments about the temple. Instead he responded to the disciples with words of warning. The glory and the beauty will not last. There are times and seasons for everything – which we know already. He went on to describe a time of crisis, the kind of crises which have been happening to humanity for centuries. He warned of what will occur: the days of rich beauty and a comfortable faith life will not last, even when they are dedicated to God. There will be wars and insurrections, earthquakes, famines and plagues. We will experience suffering and destruction of many aspects of our lives. It will seem like our world is falling apart. Our lives and well-being will be in jeopardy.

Our trials of faith

Jesus also predicted trials of a different kind – that our faith itself will be challenged and put to the test. He said, “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) There are still places in the world where Christians are suffering in the name of Christ. I confess that I am glad that does not happen here in the same way.

These examples are things that Christians were experiencing when the gospel of Luke was written. We will never be sure of the exact words that Jesus said in this moment. It appears, though, that Luke may have told the story in a way that his readers or listeners could better hear God’s words of comfort. In the U.S., most of our lives are not be threatened due to our faith, though our faith is still challenged by what happens in our lives.

Tragedy and injustice strike on a regular basis – whether it’s close to home or around the world. Hard times and crises come for us all as individuals or families: in the form of health problems like my mother’s ongoing struggle with breast cancer; or like the economic struggles that many of our households face with unemployment or underemployment, or insufficient social security or disability support.

Hard times and crises come for us as communities, too. They did for Pittsburgh 30 or 40 years ago when the mills closed. Churches are not exempt either, even though we are about worshipping God. Here at Emanuel's we are experiencing that kind of crisis now. The dramatic gap between our income and expenses, doesn't look good with our rapidly depleting savings in our memorial investment account. Now that our 2011 "estimate of giving" cards have been submitted, it is clear that we are in a harder place than we had hoped. Our choices about the shape of our ministry in the coming year will narrow even further. The church council is exploring what our options really are, given our resources. You will hear and receive more information after we know more.

God's promise

What's interesting is that Jesus did not say anything about these trials being God's judgment, though that is often what we think. Jesus' words of warning are not a call to repentance, or even to preparation. In fact, he said, "So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance." (21:14)

Instead, Jesus' prediction or prophecy is focused on reassurance and comfort. He reminded his disciples of God's ongoing presence, care, and protection, even amid trauma and crisis. He encouraged them to live their vocation as believers, even

in hardship. No matter what would occur in the future, they were still to worship God, to witness to God's love, and to serve the world in God's name.

Jesus' predictions make it clear that our lives are not primarily focused on being healthy or live a long life. We're not to be as successful or as rich as possible. We're not to be focused on raising perfect children or creating a legacy. When the rubber hits the road, we are windows to God – similar to the stained glass windows around us. Our lives are focused on sharing the light of Christ with the world.

Our temples – which could be understood as our bodies or our church buildings – will crumble. Our stone and our flesh will return to the dust of the earth. That simple fact makes us grieve and mourn, when we face it. We often wish that weren't the case. But we all know that it is true.

We also know that the faith of Christ can not be contained by our mere stone or flesh. Our God is much bigger and more powerful than both of them. The power of God in Jesus Christ could not be broken by all the sin and hatred and death of our world. His love and life shattered the chains of sin and death that bound all of humanity. Through Christ's faith and generous grace, our lives can not be bound by sin or death either.



God reminds us and the disciples: “Do not be terrified.” (21:9) God has been in all these tight spots (and worse!) before in Christ Jesus, who withstood suffering and destruction, betrayal and death. Since that’s the case, the promise that the Holy Spirit will be present with us gives me much more assurance. God has been there and done that before – and been faithful amid it all. Jesus proclaimed that at these times God will act to strengthen our faith, give us courage, and help us to witness to God in word and wisdom.

But that’s not all! He said, “[N]ot a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.” (21:18-19) When the world or the church seems to fall around us, God is still with us and protecting us. The unending life that we have received cannot be taken from us.

Our lives of faith will not always be beautiful and peaceful. We will have crises, as a church and as people. But no matter what happens, God is with us. The Holy Spirit will give us the strength and wisdom to be faithful.

May this be so, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.