

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
16 November 2025

Luke 21:5-19

Jesus remains in the Temple this week. In the passage for last week, we saw Jesus debate the Sadducees about marriage in Heaven, the third of three tests posed to him by the authorities and people in power at the temple and in the city. The object of those tests was to catch Jesus in some offence against God or the emperor, which they could use to arrest him. After he gets a brief reprieve from his attackers, Jesus begins to teach the disciples. First, in Chapter 21, Jesus points to the generosity and faith of a poor widow who put two copper coins in the treasury, quietly and almost in an embarrassed way, she put in all she could. Jesus contrasts this behavior to the grandstanding and showy way in which rich people put their heavy coins in the treasury, boasting of their great generosity. Jesus says that “put more” because she put in all he has to live on.

Then Jesus moved from the small, tiny, insignificant (in the eyes of many) to the grand, noteworthy, ways in which the temple is adorned. To the disciples, the Temple was the largest structure they had ever seen, and they marbled about how “It was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God.” The use of the word “gifts to God” contrast the story of the poor widow with the Temple itself. The widow gave what she could, while those who adorned the temple gave extravagantly. Jesus said, "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."

In this prophesy of Jesus we see the interplay of three different times in history. The first is when the story took place in the year 30, when Jesus prophesizes the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. The time will come when the grand structure, with all its adornments will be toppled down. The second historical period is the year 80 CE when the story was written by Luke. For over 10 years, that generation had grieved the destruction of the temple by the Roman empire around the year 70 CE. And as Jesus had predicted, the entire structure, which took decades to build, was destroyed over the space of several days to quell the people's rebellion against the empire. I often wonder why Luke chose to retell this particular story in the year 80? And I believe the text itself gives us some clues of what Luke is trying to address.

One of the earliest distinctives of Christianity was the belief in the imminent return of the Messiah. One day, the Messiah would come to judge the living and the dead and to meet out judgement or recompense to his people in accordance with their

faithfulness and loyalty. But 50 years have passed and he hasn't returned. Two generations have come and gone and there are no signs of when he might return. Worse of all, there have been some imposters already who have shown up in various places claiming they are the returned Messiah. It is important for Luke to set the story straight by recalling Jesus' own teachings on this matter. Jesus said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and 'The time is near!' Do not go after them."

Persecution is another issue the community of Luke is dealing with in the year 80. Christians have been arrested, tortured, beaten, forced to betray their own families under duress. And many have been killed. It is important to Luke to recall how Jesus had forewarned about these persecutions. Jesus 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." Everything that has happened to his community was supposed to happen, and all of these sufferings have a purpose. This is an opportunity to testify about Jesus and the salvation he came to bring. Jesus said, "This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict."

It is said by many that the blood of the martyrs was the seeds of the Church, and this is exactly what's happening here. Although many have died, the Church continues to grow around the known world of the day. Even though there is evidence that many disciples were betrayed "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. But not a hair of your head will perish." The word "perish" here points to something deeper than physical death. Even if the enemies can kill their bodies, no one can kill their souls. Those who endure and remain faithful to Jesus will inherit a kingdom that had already been prepared for them. As Paul said in Romans 8:18, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us". Those who endure will most certainly receive their reward.

This is an important message for Luke because some of the disciples have lost hope of Jesus' return. They are saying, "He is not coming, and we are dying." As a result, some were abandoning the faith. Luke wants to say, "He will return, but he himself told us to be patient. He will come at an unexpected hour!" Jesus said, "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately."

The third time in history this passage points to is the time of the reader? At this point, we must ask the question, "What do these events and prophecies announced in the year 30, written in the year 80, have to tell us today in the 21st century? How are we similar and dissimilar from the original audiences?" In many ways, we have experienced Jesus's prophecies. We have seen, "Nation rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. (We have seen) great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues. (We have seen) dreadful portents and great signs from heaven." We too live in fear. Nature can be unpredictable, humanity's tendency for cruelty and inhumanity is seen in our world every day, corruption and political instability are a part of our daily reality, and we live in a country where the gap between the very rich and the very poor is increasing at an unprecedented pace. Many of us are deeply concerned about the world we will leave our children and our children's children. The high levels of unemployment and runaway food and housing prices keep millions of Americans on the edge. We too look at the heavens from time to time and wonder, "How long? Will Messiah ever return? How long before Christ returns to right all the wrongs of this fragile island home? Wouldn't today be a great time for Messiah to come?"

It is easy to lose our faith during these uncertain times. There doesn't seem to be much hope to hold on to. But Luke has a message for us today. God is in charge of history and those who endure in their faith will receive their reward. We must be strong, and we must do what believers do at times of uncertainty: We must get busy producing the works of the kingdom. While we continue to wait for Messiah, we engage in Messiah's work in our midst. We feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the infirm, fight for justice for the voiceless, accompany the lonely, and inspire each other to good works. The kingdom that is to come is already here, and God can be found in our story if we pay close attention. No one knows when the end will come, but we cannot wait for the end to produce the works of the kingdom. We must start here and now, one step at a time, in season and out of season, at times of famine and at times of plenty, when all speak well of us and when we feel isolated and rejected. Messiah is among us in many ways, and our current sufferings are insignificant when compared to the glory that will be revealed to us. We must become each other's safety net. We must wait together, and we must work together to make God's dream for the world a reality in our midst. God is on the move. Our final vindication is near!

May our Lord continue to bless you. Amen!