THE BARE FACT OF PRAYER
(Isaiah 65.17-25; Luke 21.5-9)

I am told that well over 200,000 visitors a year pass through the doors of Rockefeller chapel. And while I haven’t stood by and personally tallied the numbers, 200,000 seems a modest estimation. There are at least as many tourists—if not more—waiting outside to get a glimpse of this magnificent space before and after the service as there are gathered here for worship on any given Sunday morning. It is not unusual, in fact, for a few to come in just long enough to catch a glimpse of the soaring stone arches and the warm tones of the English oak before anything too religious occurs. But no matter. We welcome all, however long they visit, and hope that everyone finds something here to inspire them to live generously and well.

Given the collective wonder that this house of prayer engenders, it isn’t too difficult for us to imagine how Jesus’ prophecy in today’s Gospel pierced the hearts of those who visited the temple of Jerusalem, admiring the beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God.

“The day will come,” said he, “when not one stone will be left on another; all will be thrown down.”

No, it is not hard to imagine at all how some visitors glanced in his direction with disapproval before taking the hands of their children and hurrying away.

Now this prophecy was remembered by an author, scholars tell us, who most likely penned the Gospel of Luke at least a couple of decades following the destruction of Herod’s temple in 70 AD. But even if the memory represents an accurate description of what Jesus said long before
the Romans crushed that Jewish revolt, sacked Jerusalem, and left no stone standing, it is not so
far-fetched that Jesus would have uttered these words.

Herod’s temple, after all, was not the first temple of Jerusalem. Nor would it have been the
first to be destroyed. It was the second. And if a prophet in 30 AD prophesied the destruction of
the temple, those words would have stung all the more to those who carried within them the
ancestral memory of the destruction of Solomon’s temple, the first temple to be destroyed. In
598 Nebuchadnezzar II and his armies ransacked Jerusalem and dragged a number of Judeans
into exile in Babylon.

The destruction of a temple, a place where one takes one’s highest aspirations, deepest
longings, expressions of contrition and gratitude, is no small thing. I can think of no more
powerful symbol of utter devastation. It is a destruction that breaks the heart of a people.

Three months to the day before I returned to this place, many of us watched with horror as
Notre Dame burned, grieving deeply over what appears to be a mere accident. It will be rebuilt,
eventually. And it won’t be quite the same.

Some people carry with them the memory of violence done inside of and to their places of
worship. There is a reason that places of worship are targeted by acts of terror. It is a means of
ensuring that a people will experience utter devastation that will leave them broken and mute.

And yet, this prophecy we have recorded in Luke takes a strange twist. After describing the
horror of the temple’s destruction and the persecution of his followers, Jesus says, essentially,
“Take heart, the world has not yet come to an end, and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. By
your endurance you will gain your souls.”
Today’s prophecy from the book of Isaiah, with its soaring vision of a new future, is set in the era of the return of the Judeans who had been exiled in Babylon. And it was during this time Cyrus of Babylon called for a rebuilding of the temple at Jerusalem, a mere shadow of Solomon’s original temple. It was later renovated and expanded by King Herod just before the birth of Jesus.

So by the time Jesus and his followers visited the temple, they would have enjoyed something newly renovated that had centuries of history: it had been built at great cost, ransacked, destroyed, then rebuilt to modest proportions, and finally expanded.

Eventually it would meet destruction again. It hasn’t been rebuilt to this day. But the people remain and with them their aspirations, longings, grief, and gratitude. Their prayers endure.

Faith born in exile changes one’s appreciation for these beautiful places of prayer. In the mornings, when my workday begins, I make a point of entering one of the South doors of this chapel and lingering a while before heading to the office. This is an inspiring place to be, even when empty.

But it comes alive after the doors are opened, when the worn out student finds a place to rest and pray, when the visitors wander about, when the Zen Buddhists meditate on this chancel, whose stone floor feels so solid, so permanent beneath them— and yet they practice their mediation to savor not the building, but the present moment, recognizing that even the ground on which they sit and the walls that protect them from the elements are impermanent. The fact of impermanence is one of their religion’s greatest insights.
My own gratitude for this place emerges not from any illusion of permanence, but from the ancestral memory of exile, the stories of how my ancestors, enslaved on plantations in Alabama on my father’s side and Georgia on my mother’s side, used to leave their modest cabins behind and go, not to church, but out into the wilderness, tracing cathedrals in the damp air built of hurts and hopes and the scent of Southern pines.

Those ancestral stories of prayer in the Southern wilderness captured my imagination as a young boy when I read the poetry of that abolitionist Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who wrote of his Eastern wilderness:

Like two cathedral towers these stately pines
Uplift their fretted summits tipped with cones;
The arch beneath them is not built with stones,
Not Art but Nature traced these lovely lines,
And carved this graceful arabesque of vines;
No organ but the wind here sighs and moans,
No sepulchre conceals a martyr’s bones.
No marble bishop on his tomb reclines.
Enter! the pavement, carpeted with leaves,
Gives back a softened echo to thy tread!
Listen! the choir is singing; all the birds,
In leafy galleries beneath the eaves,
Are singing! Listen, ere the sound be fled,
And learn there may be worship without words.
Buildings crumble. Markets crash. Bodies age. Sometimes hearts are so callous that they would seek to do violence to others, leaving them broken and bereft of words.

In moments of devastation, we do well to reach for the stories of endurance from our own past or from those of our ancestors. If we reach far enough, every family or every people has them, somewhere. Remember that we are the fulfillment of someone’s dreams, dreamed in exile, or devastation, or during escape from a hostile land—dreamed in mundane moments of struggle. Someone prayed that we would flourish and grow, just as we hope for those who come after us.

Admire these wonderful stones, care for them as beautiful as they are, admire but do not grasp as if they will never fade away.

Hold fast, instead, to what endures:

“Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.”

--Psalm 90

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