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The Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

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Luke 21:5-19



About 20 years before Jesus was born, King Herod, Herod the Great, began building. (Aside: Now Herod was the ruler of Judea, the area of Israel around Jerusalem, and he ruled with the approval and support of Rome.) Unleashing a massive construction project that would result in the largest sacred space in the Roman world, King Herod coordinated a decades-long renovation and expansion of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. This renovation was simply enormous: doubling the size of the Jerusalem Temple complex to about 35 acres, building all sorts of new courts and colonnades, lavishly decorating the Temple in gold, and solidifying the Temple as an impressively formidable and powerful monument through the installation of massive foundation stones, some weighing over 600 tons. These are the stones that Jesus' disciples marvel at in this morning's Gospel reading.

Why did Herod invest so much time and so many resources in this massive building project? Was it because Herod was so devout that he wished to honor God by expanding God's Temple? Or did he renovate this building in order to express his respect and honor for his Jewish subjects? Not at all! The Jewish historian Josephus tells us plainly that Herod was a shrewd politician who cleverly used construction projects for two main purposes. First, he built large buildings like the Temple to strategically ingratiate himself with his Jewish subjects in order to consolidate his power over them, knowing that if he kept them relatively happy, Rome would keep him in power. And Herod also knew that if the Jews grew unhappy enough, eventually Rome would sack him and install another leader in his place. So Herod used construction

projects to shore up political support for his continued reign. Second, Josephus also tells us that Herod coordinated large construction projects not only to maintain his power but also to make a name for himself. Herod was a bit of a megalomaniac and desired the personal glory attached to impressive buildings. So in order to advance his glory and fame, in order to build up his own personal name, he decided to massively expand God's Temple.

Now it's at this point in the story that we pick up the action from Luke: "When some," Luke writes—referring to some of Jesus' disciples—"were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones..." As is fairly often the case in the Gospels, the disciples in our Gospel passage this morning are presented in a rather unfavorable light: they come across, frankly, as naive, gullible yokels or dupes. "Wow," they marvel, gazing at Herod's Temple, "just look at the big buildings! Just look at those shiny stones!" Though not stated explicitly by Luke, an important subtext throughout this chapter is the attractive, but ultimately doomed, allure of temporal power—the power of Empire. In other words, when Luke emphasizes the disciples' amazement at the buildings Herod has constructed, the stones Herod has fixed and decorated, the message communicated by the disciples is not "Wow, praise God for God's awesome Temple!" but quite to the contrary, "Wow, what big stones, what huge buildings that our leader Herod has set in place!"

This political interpretation is strongly suggested by Jesus' rapid response. If the disciples had been wowing the immensity of the Temple in order to praise God, Jesus surely would not have rebuked them so swiftly. But just look at Jesus' reply: "You see these great buildings? All will be thrown down." With immediate and devastating critique, Jesus quickly demolishes the disciples' naivete. In effect, Jesus warns them not to be so swiftly carried away by the outward show of Empire, not to gullibly give in to the allure of imperial power and wealth expressed so ostentatiously in giant buildings and showy monuments.

The disciples, however, are taken aback at Jesus' surprising rebuke, and in their shock they ask him for a timeline: when are the buildings going to fall? What will be the sign that the end is near? And Jesus, in characteristic fashion, does not answer their question directly, at least not at first. It must have been rather challenging to have a regular conversation with Jesus, because as we see throughout the Gospels, like a master chess player, Jesus is always a few steps ahead of everyone else. Characteristically, Jesus responds to difficult questions not with direct answers but rather with a statement or a question of his own that exposes the real heart of the issue. (Recall, for example, the question, Jesus, is it lawful to pay taxes? And his enigmatic reply, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's; give to God what is God's.") In our passage this morning, the disciples ask for clear info about signs of the

End, for a timeline, and how does Jesus respond? Not with a timeline, but with the order: “Beware that you are not led astray.” Later on, Jesus does refer to “wars and insurrections,” to earthquakes, famines, and plagues, but his most immediate response to his disciples’ request for signs—the answer that Jesus wants to make sure they hear first is: “Beware that you are not led astray.” Why does Jesus respond this way? What is going on here?

When I was a boy, sometime around 3 or 4 pm most afternoons, I would start to feel hungry. And I would go to my mother and say, “Mom, what time is dinner?” And my mother would respond, “Don’t eat any cookies.” “Mom, what time is dinner?” “Don’t eat any cookies.” That reply did not really answer my question; it didn’t really address my desire for a timeline. But it did address a more important issue. In effect, my mother was saying, “Dinner’s going to come sooner or later. And I could tell you what some of the signs will be”—certain aromas will fill the air, certain cooking sounds will come from the kitchen, just like wars and insurrections, earthquakes and famines, as the End approaches—“but,” says my mother, “that exact timeframe and those specific signs aren’t really the most important issue here: what’s really critical,” she says, “is that when the time comes, you are ready for the meal. When the time comes, what’s important is that your stomach isn’t full of empty cookies. When the time comes, what matters is that you are still hungry for the real food, and that you haven’t been led astray.”

This reply of Jesus was really important for the disciples to hear—and it is really important for us to hear today—because when you live in the midst of Empire, as we do, distractions abound. Opportunities to be led astray—to fill up on the cookies and miss the meal—surround us on every side. For the disciples, these distractions appeared in Herod’s impressive buildings, temptations to place their trust and hope in temporal, earthly rulers. In addition, Jesus also warns his disciples in these verses about the many false saviors that will come in his name, trying to lure them away, seducing many with false promises that they cannot in the End fulfill.

And we hear these seductive, distracting voices too: particularly in this country, with its imperial reach around the world, its imperial resources, and the imperial comfort that surrounds so many of us, often insulating us from the daily dangers, cares, and concerns of our global neighbors. And while that privilege and power certainly can be used for good, its imperial roots link us back to the disciples and Jesus’ warning against being led astray. For Jesus knows that imperial privilege and imperial power can be profoundly distracting to us humans—as we see plainly in the disciples’ almost comic wonderment over Herod’s big buildings and beautiful stones. Jesus knows how easy it is for us to get swept away in the undertow of bright lights, shiny advertisements,

vast cityscapes, big guns, attractive wealth, everything on-demand. Jesus knows how easy it is for us humans to be captivated by these passing attractions, which are so often paired with the false promises of imperial leaders. Jesus also knows that in the End all earthly power fails; in the End, the Empire's big buildings will crumble and fall; in the End, regardless of which party is presently running the imperial show, the Empire's massive stones will ultimately save no one, as Jesus says: "all will be thrown down." And so he warns his disciples and warns us today not to put our trust in the passing power and privilege of Empire, not to rely ultimately on the fleeting resources and wealth that surround us today, but which, like all false saviors, may well be gone tomorrow.

But at the same time, Jesus concludes our passage this morning with another command to his disciples, and it is important to hear both commands in light of one another, because one leads to the other. As we just saw, in v. 8, Jesus says "don't be led astray" by the power and wealth of the Empire that surrounds you, but then right afterwards in v. 9 Jesus also says, "do not be terrified," do not be afraid. On the one hand, all Empires eventually fail, so do not be led astray by this Empire's false promises; don't put your hope and trust in the fleeting power and wealth around you, because wars and insurrections, earthquakes, famines, and plagues eventually will sweep all such resources away. But when this happens, Jesus says, "do not be afraid." Because you haven't been led astray by the false saviors of Empire, you should not be alarmed when those false saviors eventually fail. As Jesus says in the Gospel of John, "Let not your hearts be troubled"—do not be alarmed—and why? "You trust in God; trust also in me."

We thank God for America—especially on this Veteran's Day weekend. We thank God for the safety, the security, the resources with which God surrounds us in this nation, and we thank God particularly for those who have sacrificed on this country's behalf. But we choose not to put our hope and trust in America's temporal power and wealth—in our country's "large buildings and beautiful stones." Knowing that all Empires eventually fail, we choose to put our trust in Christ and to follow His example, the example of one who chose to lay aside his heavenly, kingly power in order to be born in a dirty manger, who chose a path of suffering and even death out of a deeper commitment to the path of love. As Christians, Christ's followers, we also choose to embrace Christ's way of self-sacrificial love, even (perhaps especially) when this way contradicts the Empire's logic of power, prestige, privilege, and oppression. We choose Christ's way of sacrificial love trusting that in the End, when all Empires ultimately fail, we will not be afraid, for (as John reminds us) perfect love—the way of Christ—casts out all fear. Amen.