

**When Everything Falls Apart**  
A Sermon for Every Sunday  
*Luke 21:5-19*

One of the best things about the lectionary is that it often leads you to preach passages of Scripture you would have never chosen on your own. This morning's Gospel lesson, for instance. I've been looking at it all week, and every time I do I get depressed. Jesus says the temple is going to be thrown down, that there will be wars and insurrections, nation will rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom, there will be earthquakes, famines, and plagues, dreadful portents, and signs in the heavens. And then he says to his followers, "But before this they will arrest you, hand you over to synagogues and prisons, drag you before kings and governors because of my name. You will be betrayed by parents and siblings, family and friends, some of you will be put to death, and all of you will be hated because of my name. But cheer up," Jesus says. "Not a hair of your head will perish, and by your endurance you will gain your souls." That's when someone says, "The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ," and we're supposed to say, "Thanks be to God!"

Really? For this? For the news that we will be betrayed by family and friends, possibly killed, and certainly hated? As I said, I've been looking at this passage all week, trying to find some good news in it, but the closest I've come are those closing lines about "not a hair of your head" perishing, and "gaining your soul" by your endurance. At one point I closed my Bible and said, "Well, fine. If you can stick it out to the end, you will save your soul, and even though you'll probably be put to death, your hair is going to look terrific." That can't be right. I think I need to look at it again, and maybe this time you

could look at it with me.

It begins with Jesus in Jerusalem, where some [of his disciples] were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God. You can almost see them, can't you, pointing out its features, marveling at the sheer beauty of the place. But when they were finished Jesus announced, "As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; all will be thrown down." They couldn't believe what they were hearing. The temple was huge! It had taken 46 years to build. Herod the Great had decided that it would be his legacy, and he had spared no expense. He built a huge, rectangular retaining wall out of quarried stones the size of boxcars, he filled it with dirt and built a level platform on top the length of five football fields. In the middle of that he built the temple itself of gleaming white marble, and covered the Eastern front with plates of gold to reflect the rising sun. To imagine that all that was going to be destroyed, that there wouldn't be one stone left on top of another? It would have boggled the mind, stunned the senses.

But forty years later that prediction came true. In A. D. 70, at the end of the four-year Jewish-Roman War, and after a six-month siege of the city of Jerusalem, the temple came down. The Jewish historian Josephus described it like this:

*Now as soon as the [Roman] army had no more people to slay or to plunder, because there remained none to be the objects of their fury (for they would not have spared any, had there remained any other work to be done), Caesar gave orders that they should now demolish the entire city and Temple... the wall [surrounding Jerusalem] was so thoroughly laid even with the ground by those that dug it up to the foundation, that there was left nothing to make those that came thither believe [Jerusalem] had ever been inhabited (The Wars of the Jews, Book VI, Chapter 1.1).*

Jesus was right about the temple, and if he was right about that he may have been right

about all those other things he predicted. He said there would come a time when those who followed him would be enemies of the state, when they would be dragged before kings and governors because of his name. He said there would come a time when members of their own families would turn them over to the authorities, when some of them would be killed and all of them would be hated. So imagine this: imagine Jesus standing in our sanctuary this morning and announcing that there will come a time when everything we see here will be thrown down, when the organ pipes will be twisted, and the stained glass windows shattered, when there won't be one brick left standing on top of another. If you were like those disciples in our Gospel reading you would say, "What?!" And then you would want to know, "When?"

And this is where we need to lean in close and pay attention to what Jesus says, because people are always talking about such things. Almost from the beginning of the world they have been predicting the end of the world. I remember reading Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* back in the Seventies. And then there was the *Left Behind* series that was so popular. And now some people are saying the world will end in 2012. "Beware that you are not led astray" Jesus says; "for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them.

- "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.**"
- Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. **But**

**that's not the end, either.**

- “Before all this occurs, 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. You will be betrayed even 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 that's not the end, either. That's really just the beginning.**

If you look back over this warning in Luke 21 you see that ultimately there will be the kind of cataclysmic events that bring the world to an end. But before that there will be a time when the followers of Jesus are hated and persecuted. We haven't really experienced that in this country, though Christians in other parts of the world have. If I had to give a name to the time we are in now, in this country, I might call it “the Age of Indifference.” It's not that the surrounding culture is hostile to Christianity, but it's not exactly friendly to it either, not like it was back in the Fifties. That was “the Age of Accommodation,” and many of you can still remember it. The stores used to be closed on Sunday, you couldn't even buy a gallon of gas, and the only traffic jam in town was the one at 9:30 in the morning when everybody was trying to get to Sunday school. Going to church was the Sunday-morning-thing-to-do in those days, for everybody. If you didn't go you had to stay at home and pull the blinds. It's not like that anymore, is it? It's not that the culture has turned *against* the church, but it is no longer *for* it. In so many ways it has simply stopped caring.

When I was in North Carolina I remember parents coming to me and wringing

their hands because their children were playing in Tee-ball games that had been scheduled on Wednesday night. “I’m sorry,” they would say. “I know it’s church night, but his team really needs him.” Did you hear that? “Church night.” That’s what Wednesday night used to be called, at least in the South. These parents knew it, but apparently the coaches who were scheduling Tee-ball games had forgotten it, or maybe they were just tired of accommodating the church’s schedule. And so parents were forced into making a choice: “Do I take him to Music Makers and Mission Friends or do I take him to play left field on his Tee-ball team?” I was surprised at how often Tee-ball won out, and how helpless the parents seemed to feel in the face of such a choice. Just before I left North Carolina I heard that in Charlotte—that godless metropolis—they were starting to play soccer games on Sunday mornings.

I got out just in time.

Or so I thought. I went to Washington, DC, and had been there only a few years when the city scheduled its inaugural marathon on Palm Sunday. *Palm Sunday!* And every street in town was going to be closed so that a few thousand runners could run a few dozen miles. How were good, church-going people going to get to their places of worship on that day? And did anybody even think about that before the deal was done? The priest at St. Matthews Cathedral, just a few blocks from my church, said his attendance on Palm Sunday was usually five or six times what it was on a regular Sunday, but now people wouldn’t even be able to get to the building. And anybody who was trying to get to my church from Virginia would have to be very resourceful, making a long detour to the North just to get across the river and into the District. When we tried

to complain the mayor told us this marathon would be a good thing for the city. We should be willing to make a few small concessions.

Can you see what was happening? Not only was the culture not accommodating the church, but the church was being asked to accommodate the culture—to give up little pieces of the “Lord’s Day” here and there, to sacrifice our long-standing traditions, and our cherished values, just so we would fit in. But in all this talk about persecution Jesus says it’s those who endure to the end who will be saved and I wonder: if we can’t endure a change in the Tee-ball schedule or a Sunday morning marathon how will we endure open hostility? We’re not doing too well in the Age of Indifference. Is there any hope that we will survive the Age of Persecution? Is there anyone here who is ready to suffer for Christ? It’s hard to imagine. We complain if our Sunday school teacher doesn’t show up on time, if the Wednesday night menu doesn’t suit us, or if we don’t like the hymns. What would we do if someone came to arrest us for following Jesus?

Here’s what I’m afraid of: I’m afraid we’re getting soft. I’m sure it’s only a coincidence, but I’ve been reading a book about long-distance running, about ultra marathons a hundred miles or more. One of the things that plagues those long-distance runners is foot injuries, and one of the surprising discoveries made by the author is that those injuries are often caused by footwear—not because there isn’t enough padding in the shoes but because there is too much. Runners begin to land on those cushioned heels instead of the soles, and the heel bone wasn’t made for that. It suffers. The muscles and ligaments of the feet grow weak, since they are no longer required for balance or support. The weakened foot is easily injured, and we are typically surprised. Aren’t we paying

more for our shoes? Shouldn't they protect our feet?

But in Kenya, where boys and girls run barefoot, their muscles and ligaments grow strong, the soles of their feet grow tough, and when they run, their feet move across the ground like a herd of gazelle. And in those places where Christians are persecuted for their faith, they get stronger, the church grows. That's why I'm worried about the church in America. We haven't faced any persecution to speak of. We've been wrapped up in the cushion of an accommodating culture like a runner's foot in a high-priced shoe. And we've enjoyed it. We didn't realize we were getting softer and weaker. In the Age of Indifference things are changing; we are being asked to toughen up, to train a little harder, so that we can be ready for what comes next. And if it is, in fact, the Age of Persecution I'm afraid that many of us will fall away. As in those ultra marathons, only the strongest survive. "You will be betrayed by parents and brothers," Jesus says, "by relatives and friends. They will put some of you to death. Everyone will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

I've been thinking about that last part, where Jesus says that his followers will be betrayed and arrested, hated and killed. I've been thinking that that's exactly what happened to him: he was betrayed by one of his own disciples, arrested by Roman soldiers, tried by the Jewish authorities and by Pontius Pilate, and eventually crucified, where people passing by mocked him, derided him, and spit on him. Jesus did all that for us. What will we do for him? Will we toughen up in the Age of Indifference? Will we grow stronger in the Age of Persecution? Or will we all fall away? "Take heart," Jesus says. "They killed me, but they couldn't keep me. They can't keep you either. You may

lose your life, but you won't lose your self. Not a hair of your head will perish. And by your endurance, you will gain your souls.”

—*Jim Somerville, 2016*