



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

23rd Sunday after Pentecost (11/17/2019)

Sermon Title: "Nothing Lasts Forever"

Gospel Text: Luke 21:5-19

"Nothing lasts forever." That seemed to be the message Jesus was proclaiming in today's Gospel. "The days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." I imagine this terrified his disciples, and angered those who were listening in. Who was this Jesus? An agitator? Terrorist? Messiah? And what authority and credibility did he have to declare that an institution as important and holy as the Jerusalem Temple could ever, under *any* circumstances, be destroyed?

We on the other hand have gotten used to the idea that "nothing lasts forever." It's called "planned obsolescence." Things are intentionally made to work for only a limited period of time, and when they break, you don't bother repairing them; you just throw them away and buy new ones. There's no better example than the cell phone. Within a few years it will be obsolete either because you broke it or, more likely, technology has surpassed it and rendered it useless. It's not just small things that've fallen prey to "planned obsolescence" either. Just try to find someone to repair a television or a kitchen appliance. Even getting a pair of shoes resoled is becoming more difficult. "Nothing lasts forever."

The old expression I grew up hearing was "use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without." My wife teases me that I think a sock with a hole should be mended, not thrown away. It drives her crazy. I suppose times are different now. We don't expect things to last. We've gotten used to that with things like cell phones and computers, but it's a little different when our institutions go away. OW Houts & Sons closed over 11 years ago, and yet I still hear people lamenting that it's gone. Just think of all the changes we've experienced here in State College as fine old buildings are demolished and modern high rises take their place. So many of our local landmark businesses are gone, like Danks Department Store. Even chain stores haven't been spared. Anchors at the Nittany Mall like Sears, JC Penney, and Bon-Ton are all closed. Nothing lasts forever.

But the Jerusalem Temple? The very place where God dwells? Surely *that* couldn't be demolished, could it? Memories I suppose were as short then as they are now. In fact the Temple *had* been destroyed – 600 years earlier – by Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon. But that was *then* and this is *now*. Surely it couldn't happen again, could it? If God's home were to be destroyed, what would happen to *God*? More importantly, what would happen to *us*?

History reveals that everything Jesus said *would* happen *did in fact* happen. Four Roman Legions under the command of Titus Vespasian laid siege to Jerusalem and in the year 70 turned the mighty temple into a pile of rubble. Jesus of course knew this would happen, and the reason

Jesus wasn't in a panic about it is because he knew better than anyone else that God could not be trapped or contained within a mere building. Do you remember, in the crucifixion story, how the temple curtain was torn in half? It was symbolic of this new reality, that God is on the loose, never again to be confined or limited to one space. The Temple's destruction was just further confirmation of that ongoing truth. And so Jesus's very frank assessment of what was to come was not intended to frighten his listeners but, instead, to give them a word of assurance.

Intellectually, I think we all know that the Church is more than just a structure. Yet Christians struggle to separate their faith from their buildings. Indeed, Jesus *uses* our buildings, but Jesus doesn't *depend* upon them. Our church buildings, just like our very bodies, are made to be worn out in the service of our God and our neighbor. We rightly work hard to keep this building in good shape and to be good stewards of it, because of the vital ministry that's done here. But make no mistake. If this pulpit were to be destroyed, if this altar were to be demolished, and if this very building were to be obliterated into a pile of stones, Grace Lutheran Church would *persevere*, and the work of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ and administering the Holy Sacraments would *go on!*

Because even though nothing of *this* world lasts forever, God's Word *endures eternally*. And the Good News of Jesus Christ *perseveres eternally*. Jesus wanted to make sure his followers 2,000 years ago understood that, and he wants to ensure that we understand it too. Again, I stress that today's Gospel is intended to be a word of wisdom, comfort, and assurance, not terror. It reflects our reality - we live in a world of constant change. Trends come and go. Buildings crumble. Athletic prowess fades with age. Intellectual sharpness dulls with time. And all of the people and material things we surround ourselves with will one day turn to dust. But we can always depend on the unchanging solid rock of Jesus Christ. As long as we keep Jesus at the center of our lives, our ministry, and our church, everything else will fall into place.

Of course, if you read today's Gospel carefully, you see that buildings are the least of our concerns. Jesus speaks with alarming candidness about the future his followers will experience: wars, arrests, persecution, hatred, and even death. It's like those pharmaceutical ads we see on TV. After telling you how the miracle drug will cure your ailments, the announcer discloses, at a speed you can barely understand, all the side effects the drug might cause. It inevitably leaves me feeling like the cure is far worse than the disease. Jesus seems to be doing the same thing. "Come follow me! I come with mercy, love, forgiveness, and new life. But by the way, take up your cross because you may be hated, persecuted, and even killed." We don't talk much about that, but a possible outcome of following the Way of Christ *is* worldly suffering. That shouldn't be a surprise to us. We all know how Jesus met his mortal end. And if they could do that to *him*, imagine what the world can do to *us*.

But you know, the Christian Church in its first few centuries didn't have a lot of "lukewarm" Christians. They all knew there was a potential cost to following Jesus, and they were all-in. And indeed, many of them suffered horribly. But the Church grew like wildfire. I'm not here to advocate martyrdom. But I'd suggest that if Christianity today doesn't possess the same social power or privilege it possessed a generation or two ago, that's not necessarily a bad thing. No one comes to a church these days because it's the popular or prestigious thing to do or out of fear that someone will report you if you stay home. People come to church now

because they *want to*, because they're feeling *drawn to Jesus*, and because they're head-over-heels *in love with Jesus*. That's a very good thing and something that will result in a stronger, more authentic, and more faithful Church that's not primarily interested in accumulating worldly power but in loving God and loving our neighbor.

And so ultimately what Jesus has laid out in today's Gospel lesson isn't intended to be a depressing burden but a holy opportunity. "Nothing lasts forever" is a statement of hope, not chaos, when what's passing away is a lukewarm Christianity that has lost sight of the centrality of Jesus Christ. Contemporary society has replaced Jesus with all sorts of false gods like technology, worldly acclaim, and the soulless pursuit of prosperity. As a result, we as a people are starving for authentic community and authentic love. We are starving for Jesus and the kind of meaningful, fulfilling life that only he can offer. And so he has called and equipped his Church in this day for the opportunity and mission of a lifetime: to share the Gospel with a new generation of seekers. So friends, in this era of change, *do not be scared*. Be excited! Because Jesus Christ is leading our way. Amen.