

TEXT: Luke 21:5-19
THEME: By your endurance you will gain your souls
SUBJECT: Transitions
TITLE: Navigating Turbulence

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Messiah Moravian
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Old orders die, but they do not die peacefully.

After the Jews returned from Babylonian Captivity, they reconstructed the Second Temple as a replacement of Solomon's Temple destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 589 BCE. The new structure was built on the old site and completed about 515 BCE. It was less finely appointed than Solomon's structure.

Herod the Great refurbished it in the 15th year of his reign, erecting new foundation walls, enlarging the surrounding area to twice its former dimensions. Work on reconstruction continued for decades. The exterior structure lacked nothing that could astound either mind or eye. It was covered on all sides with massive gold plates. The sun upon it radiated so fiery a flash that people standing to look at it were compelled to avert their eyes.

To approaching strangers it appeared from afar like a snow-covered mountain, for all that was not overlaid with gold was pure white. From its summit protruded sharp golden spikes to prevent birds from settling upon and befouling the roof. Some of the stones were 68 feet in length, 8 feet in height, and 9 feet wide.

The work was completed in 63 CE. The Jewish revolt against Rome began in 66 CE. In 67 CE Rome dispatched its ablest general, Vespasian, to quell the revolt. In 70 Vespasian was made emperor and left his son Titus in charge of the Jewish war. In late July the Romans began to bombard the Temple courts. Many Jews continued to believe that at the eleventh hour God would intervene miraculously to save his people and his Temple.

When the Romans finally broke into the inner courts of the Temple on 28 August, they found six thousand Jewish Zealots waiting to fight to the death. They defended themselves with extraordinary courage, deeming it an honor to die in the defense of their Temple. The Temple was set on fire and razed to the ground, with many Zealots flinging themselves onto the swords of the Romans, while others hurled themselves into the fire.

The destruction of the Temple was for Jesus, his disciples, and the people of Israel an event of cosmic proportions. The Temple was a microcosm of the world, the meeting point of the divine and human realms, and thus the place from which God's presence and power in the world emanates. For first-century Jews and Christians alike, the end of the Temple meant something close to the end of the world.

Many contemporary prophets fear the end of life as we know it is near. Around the world, democratic norms and institutions are under assault by nationalist and racist ideologies with strong men proclaiming themselves messiah. The destruction of the environment, social

upheaval, unending conflict in the church, portend the death of the old orders. Political, cultural, economic, and religious conflict unsettle us all.

And here we are today celebrating 68 years of life and witness in this place, our place. We are not immune from turbulence in the world or in the church. We live and move, work and play, in a turbulent moment in history.

How can we navigate the turbulence without and within? First, Jesus forbids naïveté: Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come promising “I am he!” I am the one, the only one, to make all things right. Discerning who is a charlatan and who is a prophet is of supreme importance. Charlatans are prone to promise the sky, while prophets, like Jesus, dissuade us from believing in a miraculous deliverance.

Secondly, Jesus tells us not to be terrified when the walls of the Temple, when all we have known and believed and even cherished, come crashing down around us. Yes. Causes for terror abound when old orders fall. But fear causes us to do unimaginable things: to betray our parents, to betray our brothers and sisters, to betray our spouses and our children. To save the old order, fear justifies the murder of family and friends.

Old orders die, but we don’t have to kill each other defending them.

According to Robert Wilken, Emeritus Professor of Early Christian History at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, there never was a golden age in the Christian past. Christian hope did not come to fulfillment in the age of the apostles, nor in the time of Constantine, nor in the Middle Ages, nor during the Reformation, nor in the revivals of the 19th century, nor in the movements of renewal in our own time.

The history of Christianity is a story of imperfection and fragmentation, but also a history of hoping and striving for an end that cannot be seen, yet bears on the present. Often those who proposed new ways of thinking and acted in unexpected ways turned out to be more faithful than those who repeated the old formulas. Christian hope is set on things that are yet to be.

The death of old orders creates turbulence. Navigating turbulence requires discernment and keeping calm. It also entails, Jesus says, endurance. By your endurance you will gain your soul; by your perseverance you will save your life. Endurance is not a very exciting anniversary present, but sometimes it is only by endurance that we live to celebrate another anniversary.

I have chosen to talk about navigating turbulence, rather than resisting it or fighting it or allowing ourselves out of fear to become unhinged by it, for this reason: turbulence is not all bad. Turbulence stirs things up. If we fight it or hunker down into old securities, the turbulence will break us into pieces, tear us apart.

Turbulence successfully navigated, however, carries us into a more hopeful future, allows us to create new orders for the flourishing of life, not for the privileged, but for all God’s children.