

I wonder if we know Jesus, or would even like him if we did?

We walk out of the National Cathedral in Washington, DC, after Colin Powell’s funeral and exclaim, “Teacher, look at the Indiana limestone, the flying buttresses, the high arches, the gargoyles (one in the shape of Darth Vader), and gutters large enough to walk through!”

We walk out of St Patrick’s Cathedral in NY after Sunday Eucharist, “Teacher, look at the Tuckahoe marble!” We walk out of Westminster Abbey after visiting Poets’ Corner, “Teacher, look at the alabaster, the Egyptian gabbro, the Carrara marble, the Tadcaster limestone!”

The Teacher responds matter-of-factly: “Do you see these great buildings? By no means shall there be a stone that will not be thrown down.” Do you remember the shock and horror felt by that most secular of European nations when Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris burned, nearly leaving no stone left upon another?

The Temple was where God’s presence was most manifest in the life of the Jewish people. The Temple was the refuge of the pious, the iconic cultural monument of the nation. Jesus’ apparent indifference is shocking, incomprehensible.

Psalm 16, like many of the first poems of the Hebrew Psalter, is a prayer for refuge. The poet, in crisis, cries for help, “Guard me, O God, for I shelter in you.” Where does one shelter in God but in the Temple? Jesus, son of the Jewish people, child of the inheritance of the Jewish nation, matter-of-factly declares that every stone of the Temple will be thrown down. Thrown down!?

We are not talking about cinder blocks: the smallest stones weighed between 2-5 tons, the largest 570 tons. These stones will not fall down in an earthquake like the one that shook the National Cathedral in August of 2011; these sacred stones will be thrown down violently!

Who is this Jesus? Does he care what we think of him? I find it strange that all the disciples want to know is *when* this violent destruction of the Temple will occur. I want to know, “*Why?*” Must what is most valuable, most cherished, be destroyed for us to change our ways, to begin to walk in the paths of life.

You need not pay but little attention to the present moment to know democracy is in crisis. “The nation has entered a treacherous new era in its history, one that threatens the system of self-government that for more than two hundred years has defined who we are as a country and as a people,” writes Terry Moe, a Stanford political scientist. “Major reforms are needed to save our democracy,” he says.

We face multiple challenges. You received a report last week from the PEC on the status of COVID-19 in North Carolina, and the implications for the church and its mission. The stones of our cathedrals are not being thrown down by the Roman army as were the stones of the Temple in 70 CE. The stones of our temples are being eroded by a virus or, more particularly, our response to a virus.

To democracy and COVID add climate change. You may have seen the clip of a dinosaur addressing the UN Assembly. The dinosaur couldn't understand why we would choose extinction: it's not fun. At least, said the dinosaur, we didn't cause our own extinction.

Why, the dinosaur wondered, do we continue to subsidize the fossil fuel industry while its policies and practices drown us in ecological disaster? Why do we readily vote for corporate welfare while social welfare, designed to raise thousands upon thousands of little boats above the poverty line, makes us nauseous and resentful?

The first creation story in Genesis reads, "When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the abyss and a mighty wind swept over the waters, God said, 'Let there be light.' And there was light." Creation, according to Genesis and the rest of the biblical narrative, is the ordering of chaos for the flourishing of life.

Creation is not a once and done deal, for chaos continually threatens creation. When institutions—be it the church, the courts, congress or corporations—are unfaithful to the trust granted them, chaos ensues. Chaos is a refuge only of those escaping accountability.

Why do we need such crises to provoke changes in how we live? Can we, as the author of Hebrews instructs, provoke (incite) one another to love and good deeds, encouraging one another to choose life?

The suffering occasioned by the end of the old order may be the birth pangs of new life. The synagogue eventually replaced the Temple as the center of Jewish life and worship. The creation of a new order, the overcoming of chaos, however, is not quickly or easily accomplished. Labor can be long and arduous and birth pangs hurt.

The ending of any order—ecclesiastical, political, social, natural—is traumatic. Who doesn't want to find a place of refuge, a sanctuary, a safe place to breathe deeply and still the mind and heart?

I think what Jesus is teaching us is that no institution however sacred, no dogma or ideology however inspiring, can be a final refuge that overcomes once and for all the chaos of life. All our attempts to find refuge in temples, in dogma, in economic prosperity, in military power, in nationalism of any stripe, is but a chasing after the wind (Ecclesiastes 2:10-11).

God created and it was good; it was joy. Jesus' apparent indifference to what we hold most dear is meant to provoke us. The word *provoke* actually implies "to call forth vocation." Everyone one of us, without exception, is called to co-create with God. No one is too unimportant to have a share in the ordering of chaos for the flourishing of life.

Trust in God alone is our refuge, trust that the chaos threatening to overwhelm us can be ordered by the creative work of head and heart and hand, trust that the birth pangs we now suffer will end in joy, trust that God desires, not violence and destruction, but the flourishing of life. Such trust, and the creative work it births, is our only refuge.