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“Seeing Beyond the Façade”

A sermon by Mark E. Diehl

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19

There the Temple stood in all its magnificence. Gold plate overlay adorned the entrance of the Temple. Massive stone blocks that shone white in the sun composed its walls. The Temple was imposing and breath-taking. The historian Josephus commented that at a distance, the Temple appeared like the snow cap of a mountain. In addition to its appearance, the Temple was the holiest site for the Jewish people.

Its appearance and its significance weighed upon those who gazed at this edifice. Mouths would gape at its sight. Only the most articulate could do it justice. Again it was Josephus who wrote, “The exterior of the building wanted nothing that could astound either mind or eye. For, being covered on all sides with massive plates of gold, the sun was no sooner up than it radiated so fiery a flash that persons straining to look at it were compelled to avert their eyes, as from the solar rays.”

Jesus and his disciples were at this Temple. Someone commented about the nobility of the great stones with which it was built and the fine adornments with which it was outfitted. It must have come as a shock when those around him heard Jesus say these words: “The days will come when there shall not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

Who of us is not offended when something we hold dear, when something that symbolizes our highest ideals and our deepest significance, is depicted in ruins?

Who among us would not be shocked that such a great edifice is presented as nothing more than children's building blocks scattered upon the den floor?

If you trust the source of such a statement, the next question is obvious: "When?" "When will this be, how will this come about?" they asked the Lord. Such a cataclysm certainly portended awful or awesome historical events, perhaps even the end of time.

But Jesus was not interested in setting up calendars and time lines. "Don't listen to those who say, 'The time is at hand!' and 'I am the one!' In the midst of everything that may be disquieting in life, *do not be terrified.*"

Jesus takes what is supposedly grand in the eyes of everyone—the Temple—and makes of it rubbish. And he proposes events that may be unnerving are in actuality... redemptive.

It is a lesson that many miss, that many of us fail to comprehend. What appears to be big and powerful ultimately is insignificant. The building which in itself has no meaning has displaced and hidden the God who is supposed to be worshipped and served.

You and I understand this.

A friend of mine was complaining. She had bought a new dress, one more stylish than she typically wore. "Oh how lovely you look," people would say.

She complained, "Every time I wore that dress for the next two months, people would talk to that dress and not to me. I appreciated the comments about the dress, but I wanted folks to talk to me, to inquire how *I was doing*, to engage *me* in what were concerns and issues of significance. But all they could see was that darned dress."

And that is a great challenge for any who would be true to the calling to love God and serve God's purposes. We see the façade, but miss the vital center. We see the

dress, but miss the person. We see the Temple, but miss the God to whom the Temple bears witness.

Many reasons can be offered for our human tendency to be dazzled by the exterior whether it is beauty or ostentation. Perhaps one reason is that it is easier for us to trust in what we can see, and what we hope we can manipulate. If we believe we understand what is seen, then we may believe we can control it to serve our own interests.

You see, the Temple served not only as the spiritual center for the practice of the Jewish faith, it also represented for many a bargain they had struck with God many years prior to its building. The bargain was this: if the Jewish people would worship God as prescribed and follow all the details of the Torah, then God would protect his chosen people.

In the days of the kingdom of Israel, the faith of God's people had become presumptuous. They believed they could do anything—they could live in any manner, immorally, unjustly, corruptly—and God would still protect them. No consequence would attend their behavior religiously, socially, culturally.

It was these attitudes that the prophets assailed and judged and warned against. Amos cried out, “You cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, ‘Bring us something to drink’” (Amos 4:1).

Micah confronted the practices of Temple worship when he challenged: “With what shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgressions...? God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:6–8)

It was far easier for the people to ignore the warnings and presume upon the grace of God to protect them in spite of the manner of life they lived. And eventually the

nation was destroyed and its people carried off into captivity. The Temple Solomon had built was razed to the ground.

Miraculously the people returned from exile, and the Temple was eventually rebuilt. It was in this rebuilding period that a new understanding surfaced: “If we are only good enough, moral enough, religious enough, then we will be blessed by the Almighty!” This quid pro quo was the presumed arrangement by many when a new Temple was constructed.

Given their history, this was understandable. Yet God was not interested in their presumption or their performance—God wanted them! Neither presumption nor perfection is a foundation for building any kind of enduring relationship. It requires *us*, just as we are.

Will Willimon, a Methodist bishop and former Dean of Duke Chapel, tells a wonderful story about growing up in Greenville, South Carolina. It is about a time when the Christian Church made presumptions about God and life. He wrote:

“Though I could not have known it at the time, a momentous event in my faith journey occurred on a Sunday evening in 1963 when, in defiance of the state’s archaic Blue Laws, the Fox Theater opened on Sunday. Seven of us—regular attenders at the Methodist Youth Fellowship at Buncombe Street Church—made a pact to enter the front door of the church, be seen, then quietly slip out the back door and join John Wayne at the Fox.

“Only lately have I come to see how that evening symbolizes a watershed in the history of Christianity in the United States. On that night, Greenville, South Carolina—the last pocket of resistance to secularity in the Western world—gave in and served notice that it would no longer be a prop for the church. If Christians were going to be made in Greenville, then the church must do it alone.

“There would be no more free passes for the church, no more free rides. The Fox Theater went head-to-head with the church to see who

would provide ultimate values for the young. That night in 1963, the Fox Theater won the opening skirmish.

“In taking me to church, my parents were affirming everything that was American. Church was, in a sense, the only show in town. Everybody else was doing it. Church, home and state formed a vast consortium working together to instill Christian values. People grew up Christian, simply by growing up American.

“All that ended the night the Fox Theater opened on Sunday.”

Will Willimon was describing the cultural stones of an American Temple being scattered. The values of the Christian church would no longer find support by the culture. Rather than finding such a scenario a devastating end, Willimon saw it as redemptive, for the church would be required to do what it had always been called to do: to form the Christian conscience and character of the church by the testimony of the church regarding their own experience of and relationship to God.

If the church remains presumptuous about how the faith gets handed down to the next generation, if a congregation will not speak, by word and action, what faith requires us to do and to be, then we will become another Temple with the walls crumbling and with no significance.

What are we missing today because our vision is obscured by the grand, the powerful, the persuasive, the attractive, the ostentatious? Who do we not see in all their inner beauty and faithful humility? What values are hidden because efficiency is prized over character, physical prowess over spiritual depth? What redemption are we unaware of because our attention is occupied by forces of disruption rather than the promise of our redeemer?

Anne Lamott is one of my favorite contemporary writers. She presently is engaged on a book tour for her latest offering. She posted an entry on her Facebook page last week. She wrote:

“A woman in her late twenties raised her hand and asked, ‘What is the big picture? I do a lot of things that I love and value, but don’t have a clue what it all means.’

“The crowd was actually hushed, as if I might have the secret launch codes, and could answer this for all time.

“I said, ‘Welcome to the monkey house,’ stealing one of [Kurt] Vonnegut’s titles. Everyone of every age roared with friendly laughter, because we’re all in the same boat. We ALL think we missed school the day that the visiting specialists stopped by our 2nd grade classroom to distribute the pamphlets on what is true, who we are, how we are to live with the great mystery of life, how to come through dark times, how to awaken. We’re all sort of winging it, trying to learn self-love and respect, trying to be here, now, sometimes, and live lives of meaning and joy.

“You do a LOT of things you love and value? That’s the big picture. You’ve learned about radical self-care, and putting your own oxygen mask on first, yet also have discovered that we can only be filled up by service, by giving? Are you laughing enough? Are you saying ‘No’ enough? Have you taken to heart that ‘NO’ is a complete sentence?

That no one over 40 must EVER again help anyone else move to a new house? That no one over 50 must EVER chair a yard or parking lot or garage sale—for a church, or a high school sports team?

“Ram Dass said he thought that when it was all said and done, we’re all just walking each other home. That’s the meaning, I think. That’s the big picture.

You’re not squandering your time racing around all day doing meaningless BS, multi-tasking, and always feeling like you’re behind on your homework? If not, that’s what it all means. Rest is a spiritual act...

“You’re learning NOT to chase the mechanical rabbits at the Greyhound Race Track, of fame, drama, achievement, ownership? You’re pursuing a creative call of some sort, now?”

“You’re not pretending that you are going to get back to writing, singing, dance, as soon as this or that happens—i.e., as soon as you graduate or retire, or your youngest leaves home? You’re doing it NOW, badly, herky-jerkily, as a debt of honor? That is the bigger meaning of it all: creation.

“You’re living as if you may have a year or so to live, and want to make the most of it, savor and be filled, by spending time with those you love most, much of it outdoors in the beauty of our Mother?”

“So are you out there, shaking your head with amazement, smiling about the earth’s wild sweet beauty? That is the bigger picture. That is the meaning: wonder, presence, immediacy, being HERE... Are you here?”

“That’s the big picture.”

(Facebook posting, November 15, 2013, by Anne Lamott)

I believe that our Lord has no interest in creating paralyzing fear or distracting speculation among his people. Instead he calls his people to see beyond appearances, to enter into relationship with the living God, and to testify to the redemptive grace and love of God even in the most desperate of times. Amen.