

I must confess how happy I am about the election – not happy about who won and who lost locally, not happy about the ballot questions, and not happy with who won senate and house seats – no, I am so happy all the political ads are over!! We get pummeled by these ads with one side touting the wonderful attributes of one politician and the next ad warning of all the terrible events that will happen if they are elected or reelected as the case may be. All of them with catchy phrases for you to remember when you enter the voting booth!

So where are we now? We are still a divided country – still miserable, still fighting with each other, still worried about inflation, still worried about the border, still worried about Ukraine, still worried about global warming and on and on! And honestly at first glance, this reading did nothing to make me feel any better, but let's take a closer look.

Luke begins the story as the apostles are admiring the temple. Now I think our church is beautiful, strength by its stones, beautiful color and scenes in our stained glass, the woodwork that gives depth to the curved pews that allows us a far better view of the chancel and the high ceilings that impart a feeling of loftiness and openness.

The temple the disciples were admiring was Herod's temple and the timing of this story takes place after Jesus triumphant entry into Jerusalem but before His betrayal and execution – what we call Holy Week. During Herod's 18<sup>th</sup> year of his reign, gave a speech letting the Jews know that he was going to rebuild Zerubbabel's temple because he had brought the Jewish nation more prosperity than it had ever known and that he had done that "by the will of God". This temple with all its courtyards and porticos took 9 ½ years to build but the entire complex took 80 years to complete! Herod's temple mount was a trapezoid platform 1,550 long and 1,000 feet wide and cover 36 acres!

It had fences and gates that were concentric rings of holiness. The outer courtyard was called the Court of the Gentiles. There was a Court of the Women and the Court of Israelites where only Jewish men could go and beyond that an altar where only the priest could enter and only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies once a year. The historian Josephus, having seen the temple described as, "the exterior of the building lacked nothing that could astound either mind or eye ... to approaching strangers it appeared from a distance like a snow clad mountain; for all that was not over laid with gold was of the purest white", and that would have been pure white marble. The stones were smooth and some of them were as big as a car. No wonder the apostles were admiring the temple.

Can you imagine how doubtful the disciples would have been when Jesus says, "As for the things you are admiring, the time is coming when not even one stone will be left upon another. All will be demolished." Their first thought must have been: "You're kidding right? This beautiful, huge temple – what could possibly destroy it?" Then realizing He was serious; I imagine the next logical thought would be: "When"? I know I would want to know when so I could get out of town. When they do ask when these things will happen, Jesus gives them more disheartening news. Jesus says nations will fight against each other, there will be earthquakes, famines, epidemics and terrifying sights and signs in the sky. Well, at least they had Jesus to protect them, right? Oh no

they don't because next he tells them they will be taken as prisoners, handed over to kings and governors because they follow Jesus. The good news is they will have an opportunity to testify but they do not have to prepare their testimony because Jesus will give them the words and wisdom they need. The bad news is they will be betrayed by their friends and families – even by siblings and parents. The end result is that some of them will be executed, and everyone will hate them. Then comes the most confusing part of this teaching because Jesus finishes with; "Still, not a hair on your heads will be lost. By holding fast, you will gain your lives". The Greek indicates that their souls (psyche) will not be lost.

Now that sounds confusing because Jesus warns them that they will be executed but Jesus is teaching is faith which leads to trust which will lead to endurance because we know Jesus is at our side and we can rest in the assurance of Jesus presence to get us through. There is a lot in what Jesus is relaying to his disciples and as we know Jesus is only days away from being put to death so as he has been doing all along, he is preparing them. During their lifetimes, they will see these types of things – In 70 AD, the total destruction of the Temple – the place where the Jews believed God dwelled! In 79 AD, Mt. Vesuvius erupted killing thousands of people, and then the famine in Israel. They saw these things come true, thus fulfilling Jesus' prophesy – Jesus knew this was all part of God's plan and he wanted the disciples to be prepared and not be afraid but rather know that everything Jesus said could be trusted. No matter what happens, God is in charge and God is faithful. We know all the disciples were martyred except John; son of Zebedee died a natural death, but he was exiled on the isle of Patmos.

This reading can make us think that the end is near – the terrible floods and storms, nation fighting against nation, terrorists, our own country so deeply divided with hate and violence overflowing, the Corona virus, and false prophets. Synagogues being attacked. And us Christians? False prophets as warned by Jesus – pastors who claim they know when the end is coming, pastors claiming they have the power to get you healed or get you that new job or bring you wealth if only you would send in money for them to pray for you. This country is changing, and we know that.

I read one article which called the 1950's, the age of accommodation because the government accommodated the church. Stores were closed on Sundays, so families had a day to worship together and be together, children recited the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm in school, but over time things changed slowly but steadily to the age of indifference. Stores were opened on Sundays, then school sports took place on Sunday mornings, no prayer allowed in schools, and even liquor stores opened on Sundays. For me, one of the glaring factors of change was in 2002, when the District of Columbia hosted a marathon in hopes they could have a marathon like New York or Boston. They scheduled the marathon on March 24<sup>th</sup>, Palm Sunday, blocking off city streets preventing people from attending church services. When clergy went to them complaining after they announced the date, they would not change it and said it was an oversight. An oversight! Clearly, it had become a time when churches were expected to do the accommodating. Sadly, times were changing.

So, what are we to do? We are to prepare – not stockpile food in an underground bunker but prepare by praying together, staying together, and standing strong – We need to stand up for what is right. How do we do that? We do it by being where you are right now in church. I am happy for those who watch us on YouTube and Facebook but if you can be here, you need to be here in worship with us so that we can pray together and worship, really worship together. Then we can be what we should be, then we can have an opportunity to testify as Jesus told us to do. We cannot let Christianity be a thing of the past. We cannot let Christianity become a thing of the past, like a dusty old book on the shelf, so some day people will say, “Remember that there was this thing they used to call Christianity and people used to attend church?”

This is critical people; this is not some idea that isn't relevant. This is more relevant now than it has been in a long time. There have been other times in history when people must have thought oh boy, this is it, the end is definitely coming. Think of World War II and the terrible atrocities that took place. Don't you think people thought those were the end times? What is the difference between then and now? Then, there was national pride and pride of treating each other faithfully, strong pride of being a Christian, and Christians supporting the Jewish people. And where is all that now? We cannot sit back and little by little let things be taken from us. That is **not** what Jesus said. Jesus said you need to prepare, you need to have the opportunity to testify. We are to have trust that everything is part of God's plan, and we are to trust so we can endure because our God is beside us and verse 13 says, “This will provide you with an opportunity to testify” and testify we must!

We are to create beauty out of brokenness. It can be done. We have seen it a thousand times. We were reminded of it when we held our 9/11 service. People who turned tragedy into good, people making beauty out of brokenness.

I was reading about the life of Thomas Dorsey, and he was such a case. His family relocated from a small town in Georgia to Atlanta in 1908. His dad was a pastor and his mom a maid, but after the move his dad had to take a job as a laborer. He spent time in the downtown in the theaters and fell in love with music, study piano and organ. He moved to Chicago in 1916 and pursued his music career. He was doing well until one night he noticed an unsteadiness in his playing and his world stopped. He could not function and contemplated suicide.

It was a nervous breakdown, so he went home to his mother who nursed him back to health. She told him he needed to serve the Lord and stop playing in those after-hours clubs. But he went back to Chicago and married his sweetheart, Nettie Harper. In 1925, he had another breakdown and couldn't work for 3 years. After that, Dorsey vowed to do the Lord's work and he started creating sacred music based on the blues sound he had been creating, but pastors hated the music calling it the devil's music.

Then in August of 1932, his world was completely torn apart when his wife and his son died during childbirth. Crushed and broken, full of grief and pain, he turned to his piano for comfort and wrote the song *Take My Hand, Precious Lord*, which he said came directly from God. Thomas Dorsey gave up deciding things on his own and

opened his heart and mind to God. He let God in – he *listened, he gave it up to God and God spoke*. Dorsey went on to co-found the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses in 1933. Six years later he teamed with Mahalia Jackson to usher in what was known as the Golden Age of Gospel Music. He is not the only artist to credit God for the words that came to them. Poets, authors, and musicians have credited God with the words that came to them when they went through difficult times.

It is so important to note all that is going on around us. We can't give up and just say, what can I do. I am just one person; I can't change this country by myself, but I can change my attitude and reach those around me to say, "Hey, do we fight for what is ours, do we fight for what we believe, do we fight for Christianity?".

Think about one thing: If all these people who say Christianity is a nice idea and Jesus was a nice guy and everything, but it isn't real. Ask then, why all of his disciples, as well as the convert Paul, faced horrible deaths, yet not one, not one of them denied Jesus to save their lives.

Talk about strength, talk about preparation, and total belief! Can we do that? Are we that strong? We need to be.

Beauty out of brokenness – endurance – keeping the faith using the opportunity to testify!