

The Temple Will Not Stand
 Luke 21:5-19
 The Rev. Dn. Nancy Casey Fulton
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May my words be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

Last weekend Henry and I were at a conference just outside Atlantic City. Funny place for an academic conference, you might say: we thought so too, though the resort and spa near the ocean was lovely, and seeing friends was good. But I did think we should at least drive through Atlantic City, just to see all the Monopoly Streets and to get a glimpse of greed gone wild. And so we saw Atlantic, Tennessee, Ventnor—all the avenues so familiar from our childhood game—and we saw remnants of the resort town of the 1920's and 30's. But we also saw the outside of the Trump “Taj Majal,” which trumps any casino you can imagine in size and vulgarity. We saw pawn shops and stores hawking gold jewelry at cut rates (gathered, no doubt, from the poor souls who didn't know that gambling is intended for those who can't do math, as our younger son would say).

The next day, while Henry was attending some papers, I sat down with today's readings, which on first skim are not exactly inspiring, focused as they are on doom and gloom. What could I say about the day of judgment? about “dreadful portents and great signs from the heavens”? about nursing mothers caught in the catastrophe? Since my childhood, I have recoiled from Luke's images of the end times: I knew I could not speak about them, that I didn't really believe that a loving God would visit such disaster on us.

But then these words of Jesus recorded in the 21st chapter of Luke caught my attention:

“When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said ‘As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another, all will be thrown down.’” (vss. 5-6)

Fighting words among a people who loved their temple, the centerpiece of their faith and worship. Of course, this was not the first time Jesus took aim at the icons of the Jewish faith. I thought what scathing words he would have for the horror that they call Atlantic City, for these secular “temples” that promise the good life.

So much ugliness in Atlantic City. So much ugliness everywhere in the world: cities in Iraq shattered by improvised explosive devices; entire villages in Africa decimated by AIDS, drought, starvation, and tribal warfare; a woman in Saudi Arabia punished twice over for being the victim of rape, while her rapist was set free. So much ugliness closer to home: in our own denomination, parishes and dioceses—unable to accept that God calls either women or homosexuals to ministry—threaten to leave the church, seeking instead the oversight of African bishops who march on the beat of corrupt political regimes; in our government, leaders who claim to be men of faith, who claim to be spokespersons for God, destroy land, life, and liberty; among the Christian right, self-proclaimed prophets who ally themselves with the powerful in the hope of bringing to fruition their religious agendas; among political hopefuls, those who tailor their beliefs to fit the requirements of the evangelical groups who can deliver votes; here in Mt. Pleasant, nooses—symbols of hate—left in a classroom on the campus of CMU.

So much ugliness. But the ugliness that troubles me the most is the silence of the churches in the face of all I have listed. Jesus tells the people clearly that the temple will not stand, that this magnificent building adorned with jewels and gifts is destined to become rubble. He warns them further that they will be hauled before kings and governors, and that they will have to testify. And then he tells them not to worry, he will give them the words they need, words that no one will be able to refute. I think that the churches have, for the most part, forgotten these admonitions. They cling to the temple—to the structure, to the power—when what they need to do is stand outside the walls of the institution, looking with clear eyes—the eyes of the child born in a stable—at a world crippled by greed. They need to cut through all the glitter and speak clearly about God's preference for the poor and the helpless.

While I was away in Atlantic City, one of the residents of the Lynnwood Home, where I lead worship every week, was dying. I mentioned Dawn to you a couple of Sundays ago and asked you to keep her and all her household in your prayers. My mind and heart were far away from the Jersey shore, resting instead in the quiet home where Dawn lay, tended to with love. Everything about Dawn was in juxtaposition to the emptiness that Atlantic City symbolizes, for Dawn lived a life of great simplicity. She had no choice: she was born with such severe disabilities that she needed total

care. She never sat up by herself; she never held anything in her hands; she never spoke. Yet she was a teacher to us all, living patiently in a body that would have driven me to despair. She was a truly beautiful woman whose radiant smile lit up the saddest day. Dawn knew little about the material riches of the world: she was content with the loving attention of her caregivers and housemates. Her light is gone out now: Dawn died peacefully on Tuesday, surrounded by at least a dozen men and women who loved her. Her light has gone out, but for me it will shine on, a reminder that God lives in us all, that God speaks through the most unlikely of God's children, the most vulnerable among us.

Rose Marie Berger, a Roman Catholic peace activist, wrote in a recent issue of *Sojourners* magazine: "It is the sharp edge of faith that allows us to cut through the shroud of ugliness" (September-October 2007). "The sharp edge of faith." That is what Jesus knew his people needed to stand up to the powers of the world in their generation. That is what we need today—what our religious leaders need—to show the secular world the way past the temples that distract us from the real purpose of God's kingdom in the world. And that purpose is to take us along the "lesser way," the way peopled by all the outcasts of the world. The way that Jesus walked, and that he wants us to walk with him.

And so today we won't focus on judgment, which is a negative take on God's work, a real denial of God's love. We will think instead about making life better for all of God's children. Jesus came to show us how to do that. He came to teach us how to "sing to the Lord a new song," a song that proclaims a joyful world, where no one goes hungry, where no one lives on the streets, where no one is afraid to walk to the market to buy the day's groceries. A world without ugliness. A simple world, a world of peace.

Amen.

Amen.