

## The Edifice Complex

A passage of Scripture which foretells destruction seems eerily prescient today. The world is still reeling from the terrorist attacks in Paris on Friday night which killed over 125 people. Almost overlooked are similar attacks in Beirut, where nearly 50 died, and in Baghdad, where 20 were killed, most in a funeral at a mosque. Sadly, we have become inured to news of violence from the Middle East, where it seems that there have been wars and rumors of wars nearly continuously since the time of Jesus. But the loss of life is just as tragic; the grief, just as profound. All around the world, innocent men, women, and children are dying for the sake of “great causes” to which they are only tangentially related. Now more than ever, it seems, we need the reassuring presence of Jesus. Now, more than ever, it seems, we need the reminder of the faith of Hannah, whose song in praise of God’s mercy we used as our Call to Worship this morning. We must cling to the promise that God will protect the weak and raise the poor from the dust of destruction.

With the promise of that great Canticle, the Song of Hannah, still fresh in our minds, let’s carefully examine our Gospel passage for the morning. As always, we must put it in its context, both within the Gospel According to Mark and within the salvation history of God’s people. That initial message is both powerful and helpful but for me, this morning, the hope of Jesus’ message shines through even more in our present circumstance. Like the disciples, we may live in awe or even fear of the religious edifices of our day but even in the midst of destruction we can be assured that there is indeed a divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them though we and the forces around us will.

It is easy to parody the disciples at the beginning of this chapter as hopeless rubes come to the big city, childlike in their awe of the enormous temple with its marble and cut stone in a nation of one and two story buildings the color of the dirt from which they barely arose: “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings! Go-oo-ly!” But their response is more nuanced, more ambiguous, than a Gomer Pyle naivety. To begin with, the Temple *was* awesome. I hope that everyone here has had the experience of walking into one of the world’s great cathedrals and being momentarily struck dumb by the realization of its immensity, the sudden feeling of being dwarfed by the work of other human beings, overwhelmed by the history and purpose of the place. If not a cathedral, then maybe a sports stadium or the towers of commerce in a great city. We are sophisticated, 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans, after all, and we still have these reactions to impressive buildings.

Also, we must put the reaction of the disciples into the context of what has just happened. Once again, our process for sermon and Bible study does the text a disservice and once again the convenient 13<sup>th</sup> century division of text into chapters and verses obscures the continuous flow of action. Immediately before remarking on the fabric of the Temple complex, the disciples have heard their master comment on the greed, destructiveness, and pride of some of the religious authorities who are habitués of the Temple and had a generous widow pointed out to them as just one of the victims of the system which the Temple represents. It’s entirely possible that their comment is in the way of a response to their teacher – “Yeah, it’s corrupt but it sure is beautiful” – or even a warning – “There’s more power here than we can take on, Jesus!” This great stone edifice is dangerously impressive not only in and of itself as a building but also as the symbol of the religious system that runs their lives under the sufferance of the Roman Empire.

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Jesus, wisely, puts the glory of the Temple into yet another context for the disciples. If you are a fan of the Beatles and of a certain age, you may remember George Harrison's album and song, "All Things Must Pass." Whether or not Jesus is specifically predicting the destruction of the Temple which will come just one generation after his own death, he certainly knows that there has been another building dedicated to Yahweh here before, the equally awesome Temple built by Solomon and razed by the Babylonians. Before the system current to Jesus and his followers, in which Rome pulled the strings of the Jewish authorities, there was the troubled Jewish kingdom established by the Maccabees, and before that was the long-period of domination by the Seleucid empire which succeeded the Persians, who succeeded the Babylonians, and so on. Even before Solomon's great father, David, established his capital in Jerusalem, it was the capital of the Jebusites. The endless parade of political systems in the Holy Land reminds me of that famous sonnet by Percy Bysshe Shelley, which also speaks of cast-down stones:

I MET a Traveler from an antique land,  
Who said, "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read,  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
"My name is OZYMANDIAS, King of Kings.  
Look on my works ye Mighty, and despair!"  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that Colossal Wreck, boundless and bare,  
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

It begs the question: What are our edifices? Into what transient things have we over-invested our time and energy? Usually, when we say "edifice," we are using Webster's first definition of the word: "a building, especially a large, imposing one." There is a fairly common joke about successful churches or theatres or other noble organizations that they are subject to an "edifice complex," a play on Freud's famous Oedipus complex. It means that the organization has allowed itself to be distracted from its mission in favor of building and maintaining a large and beautiful building, often beyond its means. We have seen some of our sister churches, in recent years, struggle with the difficulty of keeping up a large building in times of declining membership. Our mother church, University Baptist, and Community Church of Issaquah, where the search committee first heard me preach almost eleven years ago, have each sold their buildings in the last few years and are now grappling with their unhoused identities. The "edifice complex" can loom over an organization long after the edifice itself is gone. Although I have sometimes heard people bemoan the fact that Good Shepherd Baptist Church may have become too defined by our small physical footprint, I think we can also be grateful that we are not fighting to heat, light, and maintain the much larger complex once planned for our campus.

But we can develop an "edifice complex" about things besides buildings. Webster's secondary definition of "edifice" reads: "any elaborately constructed institution, organization, etc." And, as I've already noted, Jesus is almost certainly referring to the institution and organization of which

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the Temple is the physical manifestation when he makes his prediction about one stone not left upon another. Although we and our predecessors here at Good Shepherd have never succumbed to the lure of a physically imposing edifice, are there other things which should be transient which we have attempted to enshrine with permanence? Are we careful to evaluate from time to time the “Good Shepherd way” of doing things? I think it’s a very good sign that this congregation has, on several occasions, re-examined our mission statement. Frankly, I think it’s a very good summation of our shared approach to God’s Good News and will likely serve this church for many years to come, particularly if we continue to reflect on it together from time to time. It think it speaks well of this group of believers that we have allowed one of our most cherished annual times together, the Christmas Eve Candlelight service, to morph according to the needs of our changing congregation, moving from 10 p.m. to 5 p.m. in recent years to accommodate families with younger children. I want to challenge you to continue to be thoughtful about things that many congregations take for granted. Our “Chalice Hymnal” is now twenty years old; is it time to seek a more updated source of congregational hymns? Should we turn to projected music on a screen as one of our tenant churches uses? Some of the 70s era songs in our hymnal supplement, which were exciting and new when those of us with grey hair were teens, seem dated. Is it time for another reworking of the “Red Book?” The discussion between myself and the deacons of worship and congregation president about whether this should be the year in which we drop “Camp Sunday” has now been an annual event for the last four or five years; should we pull the plug? And what about our Christmas Dinner, an event at which several of our active members have told me they no longer feel comfortable because it is so dominated by family members who otherwise do not come to church? Is it time to reinvent that event? If the fact that I am even asking these questions makes you uncomfortable, then I would lovingly suggest, “You may have an edifice complex.”

The problem with creating edifices from practices is that as those ways of doing become “set in stone” they can crush new ideas and ways under the weight of their history. That, in turn, means that those who are generating those new ideas feel disrespected and unwanted. As we look at the Church (capital “C”) as a whole, it seems to me that this is at least part of the issue which has caused so many Christians to wring their hands and utter cries of woe in recent years. It is perhaps a mark of my particular brand of nerdiness as well as an occupational hazard but anytime a subject touching on religion in general and Christianity in particular makes the news, I always pay attention. The recent popular narrative for the Church, as some of you may be aware, is that we are dying as an institution. Article after article over the past few years has trumpeted the decline of church membership and attendance, the growth of the “Nones,” that is, those who say they have no religious affiliation, and the “Dones,” those who report that they have left the church of their youth and not formed a new affiliation. Prayer, the surveys say, is down, and the only churches that are growing are the ones which inherit the members of those closing their doors. According to those who are in the know, this is the era of the Great Decline and organized religion must surely soon join God in the grave dug for Him by Friedrich Nietzsche.

But as Mr. Spock said to Scotty in “Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country,” “I’ve been dead before.” (OK, now I’m really being a nerd). We are, after all, the Easter people, the resurrection people. The Church has probably been dead too many times to count, from the day Jesus died on the cross and his followers scattered, to the various persecutions by those in authority in all times and places, to the times it has triumphantly adapted to the culture around it rather than being salt

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and light. We, the Church, have seen a lot of bad times but the message to us from Jesus is, “So what?” “When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.” As the old saying goes, if you want to make an omelet, you’ve got to break a few eggs. If you want to have a baby, it’s going to hurt. If you want to bring new life to the world, it may get a little uncomfortable. The fact of the matter is that the Church, just like our little part of it here at Good Shepherd Baptist, needs to sift through a lot of old baggage, clean out our shared attic, bust up some old ideas and practices that have started to look a lot like stones. And while that sounds at least vaguely terrifying, it’s also really exciting!

One of the things that I find really invigorating about being caught in the “Great Decline” is that there is a freedom and power to being a minority. As I was growing up in the South and Midwest, I was part of a culture in which everybody went to church. People went to church whether they wanted to or not. People went to church whether they meant what they said when they were there or not. Everybody went to church. It was where community events happened; it was where your social life happened. Everybody went to church. But when Connie and Kit and I lived in Massachusetts for two years in the early 90s, we were in a different culture. Suddenly, nobody went to church. If you went to church, you were odd. If you went to church, you meant it. To go to church in that time and place meant you had a whole different conversation about your life. We found something quite similar when moved here, although as a pastor I don’t get to move as much among the “unchurched.” But it’s remarkably encouraging to know, as I look out at you all every Sunday, that you are here because you are serious about your faith, not because it’s “the done thing.”

I’m also excited about these birthpangs because it means something new is being born in the Church even as the old is passing away. The good thing about being a “church-nerd” is that in addition to reading all those predictions of doom and gloom, I read some interesting articles and books about what’s next. Whether it’s the Missional Church Movement, which I mentioned last week and which is promoted by our denomination to get churches focused on what we’re doing in the world, or the Emergent Church Movement, which I also mentioned last week, there are exciting new ways of doing church breaking out. If you’re interested in catching up with some of these, the late Phyllis Tickle, who just passed away two months ago, did a marvelous job of summarizing the Emergent Church Movement in her book, The Great Emergence. And Diana Butler Bass, author of Christianity After Religion and other excellent works, is a constant presence on the web with her realistic but hopeful assessments of how the Body of Christ is adapting to post-modern realities. If the Church is dying, then a new, Spirit-filled construct is arising from the ashes.

The other thing to remember about all of those predictions of the demise of the Church is that they are focused on the United States and Europe. The reality, however, is that the geographic center of followers of Jesus is moving to the East and the South. In South America, Africa, and Asia, the Church is growing by leaps and bounds. The face of the Church is looking less and less like mine and more and more like Virgil Contreras or Stephen and Florence Gituma or Peter Koshi or the international students who’ve enlivened our fellowship in recent years or the folks who worship in this space early in the mornings. I think that’s exciting, too. Not because the

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churches of the Global South and East are going to get things perfect – I remain concerned about issues of gender equality and human sexuality among those believers – but because it is probably past time for a change after the domination of the Church by Europe and North America for most of the last millennium. It's time for that edifice to be replaced.

Do we have an edifice complex? Have we invested too much in the stones of the Temple or are we focused on the Spirit of God which moves far beyond the stones and cannot be enclosed by them? On the cover of your bulletin this morning, is a picture taken at St. Michael's Cathedral in Coventry, England, shortly after its destruction by German bombers in World War II. Unlike Jesus' fulfilled prediction of the Temple in Jerusalem, some stones were left one upon the other: most of the exterior walls, a tower, but the place was finished as a house of conventional Christian worship. But the people of Coventry did a unique thing. They cleaned up that Gothic ruin and made it a memorial for peace and reconciliation. Next to and, in places, connected to the old cathedral, they built a glorious new modern building; a soaring construction of concrete and steel and glass. It, too, they dedicated to peace and reconciliation, designing new chapels for a new type of worship, one that reached across barriers that had divided Christian sisters and brother from each other as well as from those of other faiths. Now, both spaces are in constant use as places for worship, contemplation, and learning. From the ruins, out of the birthpangs of war, arose two symbols of hope and new life. The freedom and power of the Spirit of God for rebirth was honored. Those who were left in the dust of destruction were raised up.

All our hope on God is founded, on that Spirit of rebirth. Even when our edifices crash in around our ears, the presence of God remains our mighty fortress. Even though our society trembles with destruction, even though our times are changing, even though there are wars and rumors of wars, the Day of God holds promise for those whose faith is in God. The challenge of the future lies before us, Good Shepherd Baptist Church, and, in the words God gave to the prophet Haggai, words that are inscribed in that ruined and glorious cathedral in Coventry, comes a promise for us as well: "The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts; and in this place I will give peace..." Thanks be to God.