



**The Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost  
November 17, 2019  
When Darkness Descends**

**LUKE 21: 5-19**

And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, “As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” And they asked him, “Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?” And he said, “See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is at hand!’ Do not go after them. And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once.”

Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. <sup>19</sup> By your endurance you will gain your lives.

**SERMON**

Our world is on the verge of destruction. At least this is what Jesus announces.



And what an odd passage of scripture. Especially in the waning Sundays of Pentecost where Jesus has been teaching about the presence of the kingdom of god.

Let's approach this text in a flexible, evolving way by looking at it through three different lenses.

The first is a worldview lens.

For roughly the first two thousand years since Jesus, the spirit of Christ has largely prevailed.

Judeo-Christian values formed our western world. The most widely painted image in art is of Mary and her child. The adoration of god led to the composition of some of the most compelling and gorgeous music in all of history. Beautiful cathedrals cover the landscapes of Europe, erected in overflowing love for Christ. In our country, followers of Christ established the first orphanages, hospitals, universities, and social service programs caring for the poor and marginalized.

Biblical values informed the formation of civil law. As Luther instructed, the law of god issues in laws that enable us to live together in peace and safety.

The teaching of Jesus to love our neighbor guided western cultures to establish safety nets for the most vulnerable among us.

But the trajectory of scripture and the insights of our spiritual theologians and psychotherapists speak of a catastrophic shift occurring in our lifetimes.



It is the incarnation of evil in history, institutions, and culture that are in opposition to the spirit of Christ.

The temple, symbolically seen as the center of sacred worship, crumbles. Built in the form of a circle, representing wholeness, and in the form of the cross, marking the pattern of salvation, the temple deteriorates.

Violence is on the rise throughout the world. Hackneyed prayers and thoughts, our response to the killing of school children. Human trafficking a global scourge.

The rising tide of addiction and mental illness.

Today, eight-nine countries are experiencing a decrease in democratic governance and human rights.

Governments systematically dismantle programs that sustain the poor, the homeless, the sick, and most vulnerable.

The Old Testament injunction to welcome the stranger in our midst has been rejected in favor of a political injunction to shut out the stranger.

We're growing numb to the never-ending news of the corrupt and criminal behavior of the most powerful.



Civility in the political realm is gone. Working for the common good—a guideline for politicians as little as sixty years ago—has almost completely disappeared. Each politician working to just be re-elected for another useless term in office. And now, with 100 moderate republicans in the house choosing not to run for re-election, extremists will fill the corridors of power.

William butler Yeats, in his poem, **the second coming**, writes:

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
**The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.**  
Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the second coming at hand.

Jesus' harsh, prophetic words appear to be taking shape in front of our eyes. Forces at work, symbolized by the anti-Christ, draw people away from the light. Darkness descending around the world.

Terrorism and trauma are worldwide phenomena. 70% of the world population report significant personal trauma. Every seven out of people on the planet! Darkness descends....

The second lens provides a filter for the church. Here the temple walls crumble, also. As a whole, the temple contains fewer people of goodwill.



A study of one denomination concluded that their pastors have a higher rate of post-traumatic stress disorder than post-deployment soldiers.

Recently, a minister moved from Pittsburgh to a new congregation in another part of Pennsylvania. His fiancée, also a minister, left her congregation to move to his town where they are soon to be married.

The congregation did not know she is unable to have children, so the widespread rumor by church members is that she left suddenly and they are getting married so soon because she is pregnant. What a sweet going-away gift!

Another recent study suggested that it is when a congregation is actually growing that attacks on the pastor escalate. Somehow people want their church to grow but also remain the same.

The temple is crumbling. My pastoral colleagues are depressed. At CLC, we are trying as hard as any to attract younger individuals and families, but the lack of response is concerning.

Fewer and fewer young adults express interest in the mainline church while more and more congregations are about ten funerals away from closing their doors. Darkness is descending....

We are to be living stones, according to the New Testament: “you, also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to god.”



But when darkness descends, the living stones turn toward death and the holy priesthood acts out in despicable ways, and the spiritual sacrifices disappear....

And then there is the third lens. The temple of our own lives.

I hope you don't hear my example as a superficial one.

Our bichon, Lucas, just turned fourteen. We got him when he was just one-year-old from a family in my former congregation.

He's a one-man dog, although he will let deb in as he's gotten older. If you come to our house, he will greet you in a lukewarm fashion (no pun intended), and then walk away.

He's slowing down, showing signs of dementia, constantly walking in circles around the living room furniture. We need to carry him up and down the stairs multiple times a day. He occasionally pees the bed at night, although deb tries to blame me.

But we're facing Lucas' impending death.

It's been fourteen years and he is part of the temple we have built. One of the noble stones adorning our temple. And, as we all do, as life remained the same year-to-year, we were lulled into thinking the temple would remain standing as is.



But in images fearful and dreadful, Jesus is telling us something incredibly important about life and how the mind operates.

The mind grabs hold of our life and then constructs a temple: this is it. It is cast in stone. This is life and it will always be this way. In this case, get up, walk the dog, give him a treat, eat breakfast, walk him after lunch, lie down and pet him, always part of every day.

And then he will be gone. The temple, as deb and i have known it, will crumble. The noble stone removed forever. No more Lucas.

Our temple of life that the mind builds is destroyed again and again. Even when the events appear to be positive ones.

The last kid graduates and you are left alone as a couple. The “empty nest” is just a modern phrase for the temple as you’ve known it being destroyed.

A man leaves father and mother and cleaves to his wife and they become one temple and two former temples are left with gaping holes in the walls.

Your spouse dies, your parent dies, you lose your job, you go through a divorce. And the temple you have built collapses into rubble for a time. It’s hard to find your place.

All our life, crises force upon us the destruction of the temple we mistakenly thought would last forever. The images Jesus employs are actually a



personification of the inner psychic turmoil and upheaval that accompanies any major life change, transition, or crisis.

And it happens again and again and again in our life until we finally face the destruction of this living stone, our very body.

Life ain't for the weak of heart. When darkness descends.

But we have these incredible words of hope: “by your endurance you will gain your life.”

Harriett Beecher Stowe wrote: “when you get into a tight place and everything goes against you, till it seems as though you could not hang on a minute longer, never give up then, for that is just the place and time when the tide will turn.”

And angelus Silesius, a German priest, mystic and poet agrees: “who would have thought this! The darkness brings forth light.

The something comes from nothing, death does bring forth life.”

This is where Luther's understanding of faith as trust makes so much sense.

That when the temple is crumbling and destruction surrounds us, we trust that, as John says, “the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.”





Let us then be who god says we are: people of the light. People who trust in god when the darkness descends. People who continually work to bring life from the death and destruction of the temple in all its forms.

### **SERMON SONG**

Maybe It's Time to Let the Old Ways Die by Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit