

All Things Made New

A sermon by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers presented November 13th, 2016,
at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Luke 21: 5-19

The prophet of old Isaiah says that God "is about to create new heavens and a new earth." Now the Church likes to talk about things being made new! We think that by talking about it enough, maybe we will actually believe it. The phrases conjure up images of freshness and vitality. But oh! how we delude ourselves! I've been around the Church a long time, and let me remind you of something: in the Church we generally do not like new things! Not really. Sure, we want new telephones or a new parking lot. How about some new people in our pews? We want the minister to preach about something new. Sometimes we just want a new minister. Sing to the Lord a new song? No, no, the old ones suit us just fine. A new church? No! No! The old church is just fine. But you know, all of us, no matter how old we are, have great buildings around us that will ultimately fall. We don't like to imagine it. We certainly don't like to plan for it. But, ultimately, we know our buildings will fail for one reason or another.

That's how Jesus reacted when his disciples were admiring the grandeur of the great temple in first-century Jerusalem. Apparently, it was, indeed, a tremendous structure, and a suitable symbol of God's greatness and glory. But Jesus knew it would one day fall. He could not say for sure when it would be; but he knew it would be a cataclysmic event, an awful event. It would seem like the end of the world itself, like everything his people had ever worked for would be gone. But Jesus also knew that the temple's destruction would not mean the end of God's creation; it would not mean the end of salvation. So he urged people to bear suffering with hope and patience. His lesson was that all of us suffer, and all of us go through destruction and tearing down. All of us even go through death, but that is not the end. He died himself, but it was not the end. He was resurrected, and God's creative power began again.

Many Christians gather today in beautiful structures. But these structures--of whatever sort--are not the ultimate focus of our lives, just as church buildings should not ultimately be the focus in our Christian worship and mission. Jesus was clear, later in his ministry, that when the temple was destroyed, he would build it up in three days. That statement was a puzzle to his disciples until they realized he was talking about the temple of himself, his body, his very identity. Thus, when the Christian Church gathers we experience something greater than the building or structure. That which is greater is Jesus Christ himself. In the Church, we believe that God is actually building a temple greater than our churches and cathedrals. God is actually growing the Body of Christ. And when we ask, "Where is Jesus Christ today?" our answer becomes, "Christ is actually us! The community of believers and worshipers and servers!" The critical elements of our churches are not stones, but the living stones of relationship. The people are the critical elements. The *literal* stones will all be thrown down, in some way or another, at some time or another. The *spiritual* stones is what will endure. There may be some signs toward the end of things as we know them. Jesus famously mentions signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, wars and insurrections, earthquakes, the economy. All that.

This past week we witnessed what we thought was the impossible: the election to the presidency of The United States of the most ill-equipped, illogical candidate you could imagine, Donald Trump. And some sacred temple in Washington came tumbling down. And now it has happened everything seems different, and it's a new political ballgame, both domestically and globally. We think it is the end of the world. But it is not the end. Rather a new beginning. Sometimes the transition hurts. Changes hurt. But they are signs that the kingdom of God is near, is very near. When you are encountering the anxiety of any change in your life, be assured that you are not far from God, but instead, very near.

That word has not changed. Jesus' word to us is the same as it was to those first disciples who heard him. The new heaven and the new earth will not come without turmoil, without testing, and our bearing witness to it at precisely those moments when it seems most improbable. The person who patiently endures finds that in doing so is reinventing their soul, shaping a life fit for the life to come, not asking that they be whisked away from their turmoil and suffering, but rather that they be given the grace and the endurance to live through it faithfully.

Beverly Gaventa calls it "soul crafting". "Soul crafting engages the turmoil in God's name and endures, trusting that God does not abandon God's beloved. It is not withdrawal. Soul crafting digs into the day-to-day challenges of our lives, recognizing that God is at work in them and through us in these places in ways that no one of us can change on our own."

People might ask: "why the Church exists?". A reason I give is that the Church is meant to teach us how to change gracefully. The classical ministrations of the church have always been associated with changes in our human lives--inevitable changes that most of us go through like birth, illness, marriage, death. In direct association with those changes, the Church provides baptism, marriage, a funeral. The Church pronounces blessing and grace during those moments of change, painful or joyous. At our best, then, the Church should be teaching us how to change gracefully. Will all be turned up-side down? Yes, I suppose it will. And sometimes we see the signs of that tumult coming to our doorstep all too quickly. But that will not be the end. God will be in the change. And all things will be made new.

We don't have to wait for the end times. There can be new life on each day of the year: a new opportunity to know the love of God. If there is ending each day, there is also new life each day. If there are things being thrown down, there are also things ready to be built up. Today, because of the ever-present threat of change, we have a new opportunity to reinvent ourselves as Christians and as a church; and rediscover our souls. AMEN.

Let us pray. O God, look favorably on your whole church, that wonderful and sacred mystery. Let the whole world see and know the things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.