

Yr. B, Proper 28
November 14, 2021
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1464 Words

Lessons: Daniel 12:1-3
Psalm 16
Hebrews 10:11-25
Mark 13:1-8

In November of 2015 our pilgrimage group arrived at the Temple Mount inside the Old City of Jerusalem. *We thought* the very same thing Jesus' *first* disciples had thought and said. "Look, what *large* stones...!"

As we just heard from Mark's Gospel, Jesus warns his disciples, "*Not one stone* will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." Technically speaking, there *are* some stones still left on top of one another. A remnant of the Western Wall of the Temple is still there 2000 years later. And about twelve of us from St. Peter's were standing before it. What *large* stones!

You need to know the Jewish Tradition which holds that *this is the place* where Adam received humanity's very first breath. In other words, this is where humankind had its first brush with life! You *also* need to know this is believed to be the place where Abraham bound his son, Isaac; and raised a knife over the boy's head, ready to kill. In other words, this is also the place where the patriarchs of our faith had their first brush with death.

How ironic! The Temple Mount is the sacred ground where life was given *and* where life was nearly taken away. What is it about sacred places which inspires so much devotion *and at the same time* elicits so much danger? There appears to be a thin line between devotion and violence. Abraham's deep devotion nearly *mised* him to kill his own son.

About a thousand years before Jesus was born, King David violently conquered the people who lived around this holy mountain. He chose this as the location to place the Ark of the Covenant—the Sacred Law which binds us to God and to one another *in peace*. You see, the Covenant is all about *Shalom*—abundant life and peace with God and with our neighbors.

It was David's son, King Solomon, who actually *built* the Temple, and for the Jewish people, there was no holier place in all the world. *This* was the focal point of creation. *This* is where Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac. *This* is where Jacob dreamed of a ladder to heaven. And with the building of the Temple, *this* was the place to worship the eternally abiding LORD of heaven and earth.

Until it wasn't. In 586 B.C. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon destroyed the Temple and also Jerusalem. He imprisoned the Jewish people, and marched them out of their own country into Babylon where they were held in captivity for a generation.

The sacred ground of the Temple was transformed into a smoldering wasteland. What is it about sacred places which inspires so much devotion *and at the very same time* elicits so much danger?

Maybe this is why Jesus says to his disciples, "Not one stone will be left here upon another." He was just remembering that awful history everyone else wanted to forget. After all, the Jewish people *did* rebuild the Temple when they returned home from Babylonian Exile. Besides, why can't we just focus on the positive parts of history? It's in the past, right? There's nothing we can do about it.

Unfortunately, Jesus disagrees with us. He understands how the past is very much connected to the present and to our future...which is why he *often* brings up sore subjects nobody else wants to talk about.

As I stood before the remnant of the Western Wall of the Temple in 2015, I witnessed a bewildering sight. Just off to my right, there was a group of eight young women—college age. They were lined up for a photograph, laughing together like sorority sisters might do while posing for a picture at a party. They all had long dark hair and beautiful faces. They were wearing matching outfits of a sumptuous bronze-colored fabric. What really stood out, though, were the black straps over their shoulders, and the matching black machine guns slung across the front of their young bodies.

Nothing has changed. Since young Isaac faced the dangerous threat of Abraham’s knife, the young are *still* at the forefront, facing the dangerous threats which seem to accompany our deepest devotions...to God, to country, to tribe, or to ideology.

“Beware that no one leads you astray!” Jesus warns us. As it was in the beginning, *is now*, and ever shall be—we must *choose* life over death...blessings over curses...truth above fantasy...love over indifference.

I do not have all the answers to these questions presented before us today, but I do have *one answer*—a place to begin. This answer came to me in 2015 when I walked past those young soldiers and took my turn at the Western Wall. I want to share it with you, along with a story of how my epiphany can apply *anywhere in our lives*, not just on the sacred ground of the Temple in Jerusalem.

When you draw near to the Western Wall—close enough to touch it—the thing you notice is that the mortar *between* those large stones is missing. Instead, those enormous blocks are connected by tens of thousands—*maybe hundreds of thousands*—of prayers.

I mean that *literally*. You see, there are lots of faithful Jews and Christians from all over the world who write down the prayers of their hearts onto slips of paper, crumple them up tight, and then *press them* into the crevices between those *large stones*.

This is the key part of the epiphany I want you to remember. Our own Margaret Boineau carried prayers for some of you who were *not able* to go on that pilgrimage. And several of us helped Margaret place your prayers into the Wall. It is a parable for where we find ourselves today.

Some of us *right now* are carrying prayers for those who are not able to be here. Some of us are filling the ‘cracks in the wall’ with our heartfelt prayers—not only the ones we carry for *ourselves*...but also the ones we carry for *other people*.

Sometimes those prayers can feel heavy even if the words fit on a tiny slip of paper. Sometimes these prayers carry the weight of the world...like the weight of large stones.

I want you to see the beauty of your devotion, dear people—because it is not just a devotion *to* God...It is a devotion *for* other people—family, friends, neighbors—whoever in the world it is whose weight *you are helping to carry right now* in order to lovingly present it before God.

There is no better image to depict the priesthood of *all believers*, than this simple image of ordinary people caring for other ordinary people by helping to carry their prayers for them...especially when the prayers are too heavy for one person to carry alone.

I once heard a completely distraught parishioner look at his priest and say, “I don’t know *how to pray* right now.” She calmly replied, “That’s ok. I’ll pray *for you*.” And *that* is what we are all invited to do: care for one another...pray for one another...help carry the weight for one another.

My friend, Dale Sessions, died this week. Alzheimer's took *almost* everything from him and his devoted wife...I say 'almost' because even Alzheimer's cannot take away your prayers. I don't mean the *sensible* words you might use to 'say your prayers.' I'm talking about the thing St. Paul wrote about to the Romans—how God's own, Holy Spirit—deep inside of you—just spills forth “with sighs which are too deep for words.”

Kim and I happened to be in Columbia a couple of weeks ago. On the way back home we stopped for a visit with Dale and Norma. We witnessed two miracles at 4:00 on that Saturday. The first was the audible joy of Dale's heart, despite the *enormous weight* of his disease. The second was the steadfast loyalty of Norma's heart, despite the enormous weight of her grief. *What large stones!*

There was really just one thing for us to do. Pick up some of the weight in the room and lovingly present it before God, pressing it into the crevices between those large stones.

When we choose life over death, blessings instead of curses, truth over deceit, and love instead of indifference; *our* thoughts and words and deeds become prayers which fill the cracks and crevices where the mortar is missing.

Sometimes, it is all we can do, but—trust me—it is always a great place...*a sacred place* to begin.

So, thank you. Thank you for caring for one another. Thank you for praying for one another. Thank you for helping carry the weight of the world in order to lovingly present it before God.

Amen.