

“Cool Kids or Children of Calamity?”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
November 13, 2022 – Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

[Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19](#)

Today’s scripture readings, on this penultimate Sunday of Year C in the Revised Common Lectionary, with next week’s Reign of Christ Sunday being the final Sunday of the liturgical year, continue the series of lessons from the Prophets and the gospel of Luke about the temple in Jerusalem.

The first of our readings from Isaiah is included in the section of the book that is often called Third Isaiah, which was written at a time after the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the armies of the Babylonian Empire and the people were taken away in exile in 586 or 587 BCE. This third part of Isaiah was written during the time that the Persian Empire had come to power, having conquered the Babylonians, and allowed the people of Judea to return to their homeland to rebuild their cities and their temple. The people who returned to Jerusalem heard stories from their grandparents about the splendors of that great city and its temple, but what they could see with their own eyes was not at all glorious as Jerusalem had been completely devastated and was then nothing but ruins. And so the prophet Isaiah, having been given a vision from God that human eyes could not see, offered the hopeful message that we heard moments ago, that God is at work among the rubble, creating a new heavens and a new earth, a new reality for God’s people, in which all will enjoy God’s blessings and the children would be at peace; none would be children of calamity, born to experience the strife and devastation that was all their parents and grandparents had known.

By the time of the life of Jesus, over 500 years later, a new temple had risen from the rubble of Jerusalem. 20 years or so before Jesus was born, King Herod the Great, a puppet installed by the then-ruling Roman Empire, began a rebuilding project that doubled the size of the temple grounds. The renovation work was still going on throughout the lifetime of Jesus, but by the time Jesus was in the temple, teaching the lesson we heard in today’s gospel reading, the temple was already a grand sight to behold and was the glory of all the people of Judaea. But by the time that the author of Luke wrote his gospel, some 50 or 60 years after Jesus was crucified by the Romans, the temple and the whole of Jerusalem had

once again been destroyed, being utterly ruined by Rome in 70 CE, and so Jesus' prediction that not one stone of the temple would be left in place, but that all would be thrown down, had become realized.

After 70 CE, Jerusalem was in ruins and the temple was nothing but a giant pile of rubble, and so the good words of Isaiah, written centuries before, that God is at work amid the rubble, became, once again the hope of God's people. Some still pray for a new temple to rise up where the older ones once stood, and many of our Jewish sisters and brothers still gather at the remaining foundation wall closest to where the Holy of Holies once was, known as the Western Wall, to pray and lament the former temple's destruction, even as the magnificent Islamic Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa mosque now stand in its former place.

As followers of Jesus, whose body was ruined by the Roman cross, and yet who rose again, we believe that destruction of what can be seen is not the end and that God still works amid the rubble and raises up that which is in ruins, but in ways that are beyond our limited expectations and hopes. We believe that all was not lost in 586 BCE or 70 CE with the destruction of temples of stone, but that God is creating a new heavens and a new earth and raising up a glorious, living temple of God's people even now. As people who house God's Spirit, we are all part of that living house of God, and this temple is one that cannot be ruined, even by the mightiest of the world's armies.

The good news that we celebrate today is that God is at work building up this temple, and that God is at work building up each of its living stones. God is at work in your own life right now, even if you feel your life is but a pile of rubble, which is God's favorite building material.

One of the things that Christine and I enjoy doing together as a couple is our Sunday night tradition of eating dinner while watching an episode of a program on HGTV called *Home Town*. This is a show about a very kind and friendly couple, Erin and Ben Napier, who renovate homes for people in their home town of Laurel, Mississippi. One of my favorite parts of each week's episode is when Ben, who is a very talented wood-worker, finds something that is old, broken, or unusable in whatever old house they're renovating, such as parts of an old wall, broken counters, or ugly cabinets, and transforms what would normally be thrown into the trash into some functional and beautiful piece of furniture to

remain with the people living at the renovated home. I love seeing ugly, useless materials being taken and transformed into wonderful and beautiful porch swings, book cases, and kitchen tables that people will be able to admire and enjoy for years.

It's a good example of what God does in our lives. God takes the stuff of our lives, especially the broken or ugly parts we think need to be thrown out, and transforms them into something new that is useful and beautiful. God is at work in your life, raising something wonderful from the rubble and renovating the parts that are already pretty nice as well; God is at work among us as a community of faith, raising up something new and beautiful in our midst; and God is at work in our world, taking the parts that we've already busted, seemingly beyond repair, and doing something new and good with them.

We've seen just this week of elections that just when we think our politics are broken beyond repair, people have been more civil, less violent, and in many (but certainly not all) cases gracious towards their political opponents. I pray that God would inspire all of us, especially our leaders, to behave even more decently and honorably in the future.

In our world, with so much suffering caused by climate change, we see leaders of nations coming together this week to discuss the problem, ways that we can better support one another now, and plans to change our ways of being so that our children and their children do not become children born for calamity on a roasting planet, but cool kids who live in an inhabitable world that they can work to make more inhabitable and lovely. I hope that we would all be emboldened by God to accept the difficulties required of us to do what we must to leave a better planet for our kids and inspired to creatively work together even more to address this greatest problem of our time.

And we all pray for God to inspire us as one human family to rise from the rubble of our ways of warring, that God would help us to move beyond our evil, violent ways of seeking to conquer and subdue our neighbors, of tearing down their temples, and stealing away their riches.

May God work with us and within us this day that we may all rise from the rubble to be more the loving, peaceful, and prosperous family that God envisions us becoming. Amen.