The Rev. Dr. David K. McIntosh
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Given at Christ Church Quaker Farms, Oxford, CT

Isaiah 65.17-15; 2 Thes 3.6-13; Luke 21. 5-18
"By your endurance you will gain your souls." †

Boy, gotta' love the Lectionary! Earlier this week, I read today's assigned Scriptures, noted the apocalyptic tone of doom and gloom, and I couldn't help but laugh. I figure God's got a great sense of humor! Especially given the events that have both preceded and followed the recent elections and the confusion over the government shutdown, and everything in this world!

The OT selection from the later portion of the prophet Isaiah and Jesus' predictions of the destruction of the Temple in Luke, both refer to the same event: the coming 'Day of the Lord.' Ancient Jewish tradition held that this 'present age' (one that is bad and full of evil, incapable of redemption and fit only for destruction) will be supplanted by 'the age to come' (a golden age of the Torah, God's Law, and of God's rule over all). This so-called 'Day of the Lord,' comes in between the two ages, a time of terrible cosmic upheaval, destruction, and turmoil.

While many might like to look back on events (food costs, job loss, shootings, wars, and natural disasters) of the past several years, indeed the past week, as the beginning of these terrible days… it's important to hear the promise of hope in these passages. Isaiah's image is one that is so powerful, reminding us that God has the capacity for creation and *re*-creation. It was first spoken to a people who felt repressed, who were in pain, who lived in fear about tomorrow. And the prophet tells of the creative capacity of our God to make things new!
'Jerusalem' stands for *all* human communities, everywhere— even those who have turned away from God, even those who have turned from love and who have not exhibited justice for all. And God can change them, transform and *renew* them. God can transform 'Jerusalem' (those communities) into new, joyful, delightful places where even former foes (wolf and lamb, predator and prey) can live in harmony. Thus, human pride and human sin are no match for God's love!

The foreboding words from Jesus, in Luke's Gospel warn of future calamity and persecutions, of wars and conflicts. He declares that what appears to be strong and mighty (whether the great Temple of Jerusalem, or the great Roman empire, or the USA, or any country in the world) will be destroyed. The greatest of human institutions are nothing compared to the Lord; they are temporary and fleeting.

I would caution us not to read into Jesus' words any specific events or a certain set of calamities. The point of his story is that when bad things happen—and they will happen—we should not be terrified or fearful; we should trust that God remains present in our lives.
Jesus does not talk about the destruction of the Temple in order to blame a specific group or attack particular actions; his is not a political agenda. Instead, he mentions that such hardships and calamities serve to develop and prove one's faith (like gold tested in fire), they are an 'opportunity to testify.' Life's struggles and hardships can help us realize God's concern for everyone… and help us to proclaim God's love— the way of Jesus.

These combined readings remind us that although life can seem hopeless and we often find ourselves slogging through complicated, difficult and disappointing days. Even when it's hard to move beyond our human desire to win and succeed, even when we fear we'll never feel comfortable or happy again, we are reminded that it's only through the eyes of God that we can see clearly. Remember God's ongoing capacity to create and *re*-create, to bring renewal and hope to the most desperate of situations.

Jesus' words about the Temple are not meant to make us fear the future or the traumatic events that will occur in life (job loss, elections, illness, the loss of a loved one, death). His words are not meant to highlight the divisions in our society or make us worry over lost ideals. He's asking us to stop fixating on what we consider to be important—like those great institutions, which ultimately fail and pass away— and to realize only through the eyes of God can we see clearly.

Jesus warns of the inevitable passage of what many of us want to last forever. He speaks of the destruction of worldly comforts and temporal powers. And yet he promises, "not a hair on your head will perish… by your *endurance* will you gain your souls." What might he mean by *endurance*? Perhaps it's a challenge not to buy into what society and the world are selling. Perhaps it's a call to follow God's will and keep 'the faith.'

Several years ago, I had the privilege of venturing down by train and subway to the Cathedral of St. John the Devine in NYC with a group of teenage men and women on a J2A pilgrimage from Trinity Church in Torrington, were I served as priest. We'd ventured down one weekday by way of the Metro North train… a rather long trip (with many stops) to Grand Central, which was complicated by the growing crowd that continually joined our car as we moved closer to our destination. The car we rode in became warm and rather cramped, as more and more 'rush hour' commuters unhappily packed themselves into a standing-room only car, none of them at all pleased to find their usual seats filled by a large group of teenagers. There were choice words and grumbling.

Even though teenagers are generally very self-conscious and these were surrounded by strangers, the mood of the filling train did not affect our group. You see, they were wearing T-shirts that told everyone they were young Christians on a pilgrimage, they were excited and proud to be on a pilgrimage with Jesus, and so they started a game of Charades. Each player took turns silently animating clues, as the rest boisterously guessed various answers.

I must admit, I initially felt a bit embarrassed that our group was so loud (I was in a collar and obviously was responsible for them), but I dutifully participated and became so engaged by the game, that at one point that I forgot about those people around us…

When I glanced back up, to my surprise, almost every one of those faces that moments earlier were frowning and sulking, were now captivated by the game. They, too, were smiling and shouting answers right along with the rest! All the way to the back of our car, strangers, young and old, rich and poor, had somehow become lighthearted. They had let go (if only for the moment) of their worries and concerns. And it was then that I realized, how love and playfulness transformed that dark and gloomy train with light and joy!

To me, those teens were an example of *holy resolve*, of ***endurance*.** They didn't try to change who they were to conform; they simply remained themselves. They were young Christians,

representatives of Trinity Church and of the Episcopal Church in CT, and they played, joked, laughed, and shared their laughter and love with the world around them.

That is the endurance of which Jesus spoke. It's not about despair, but hope; not about fear, but love. Even when things seem so bad and the harshness of the world seems to close in on us, God is present in this world; God is present in our lives! It is only through the eyes of God that we can see— 'Not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.' May we endure and remember the words of the prophet: 'What does Lord require of you? …to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6.8). ✝