

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, November 13, 2016

Isaiah 65:17-25

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.
I will rejoice in Jerusalem,
and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,
or the cry of distress.
No more shall there be in it
an infant that lives but a few days,
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.
They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat;
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.
They shall not labor in vain,
or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord-
and their descendants as well.

Before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear.
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent-its food shall be dust!
They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Luke 21:5-19

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them.

"When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." 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 plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

"But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

Let us pray...Amen.

Have you ever wondered about the human capacity for endurance? Lately, I've been marveling at the various ways that the people in our world endure disasters and hardships: veterans enduring war, typhoon survivors enduring homelessness, lack of food and water, being surrounded by death and disease, victims of domestic and sexual violence enduring their assaults, and finding ways to triumph over them. It's almost like we were built for endurance.

I was reading an article about human evolution last month, about how we came to possess a brain that is comparatively larger in proportion to our bodies than any other animal on earth. Scientists believe that we developed a more upright posture so that we could pursue other animals for food. In fact, our ability to run long distances without getting tired is almost unmatched in the animal kingdom: certain animals can run faster than humans, for short distances, but few animals can match our ability to run 10, 20, even 30 miles at a clip.

As humans became more successful at enduring long distances in the pursuit of food, the extra calories that came as a reward were employed by the body to grow bigger brains.

It didn't happen overnight, but the key components in our genetic make-up were already there.

When someone we know has heart surgery, by-pass surgery or valve replacement surgery, what is the most striking thing that doctors make them do just a few hours out of recovery? They have to walk around the unit. Their first faltering steps outside their room are just the beginning of a regimen designed to strengthen their heart and lungs. Because just hours after traumatic surgery to the heart and lungs, the human body is ready to build its endurance. You've probably heard the stories: first just a few steps, then once around the unit. Then several times around the unit, and by discharge time, maybe 10 minutes of walking.

Rehab consists of more aerobic activities that will strengthen the heart, because every fiber of our being is designed to improve when challenged: we are designed and programmed to excel at endurance.

Without one scientific article to refer to, Jesus understood that both literally and figuratively, we have been built to endure. Without anthropologists, without cardiologists, without psychiatrists or psychologists, Jesus knew that by our endurance we will gain our souls. That's just a fancy way of saying that triumphing over our challenges helps us grow.

Biologically, we are programmed to heal. Psychologically, we are programmed to learn from our mistakes and grow from our failures. Spiritually, we have been given a resilience and a tenacity that makes new beginnings in the face of disaster a daily possibility.

Just think for a moment what each of us has survived in our lives, what we have endured. Health crises, the loss of loved ones, loss of jobs, financial disasters, we are a gathering of survivors. Our genetic predisposition gives us a head start, but we also have something many others do not: our faith. The faith that God walks with us when we are in the valleys of the shadow of death, that we will come through our most challenging times perhaps scarred, but not defeated.

With our faith, Jesus said, we can endure anything.

Both our Hebrew Scripture and our Gospel Lesson make reference to what scholars call 'The End Times'. A time when the end of the world is at hand, and Jesus is ready to return. The reward for enduring what Jesus described, the wars, the insurrections, the famines, the plagues, the persecution for our faith, our reward is described by Isaiah: a time when humanity prospers in peace, when life will be so good, no one will remember the hard times.

Isaiah's vision is compelling, nearly impossible to comprehend, especially in this day and age, when our world more closely resembles what Jesus described. But while Isaiah described the world that God will create, Jesus actually gives us some ideas about how to bring Isaiah's vision to reality: The challenges put before us in our lives give us opportunities to testify about our faith.

The ways in which we endure the disasters of our lives, the ways in which we triumph over our losses give us opportunities to live out our faith. Jesus said to testify, but we don't actually have to *say* anything, do we? We already know the people in our lives who are testifying about their faith by living their lives in the face of impossibly sad challenges. Some of us are testifying this very day, by bravely living our lives in the face of pain and

loss. Some of us are testifying about our faith by simply getting up this morning and coming to church!

By our endurance, we will gain our souls.

By taking our first step after surgery, by refusing to let someone else define who we are, by owning our mistakes and learning from them, by mourning the loss of our loved ones, but living in spite of our losses, we will gain our souls.

God is going to create a new heaven and a new earth. But before that happens, we are going to be challenged to the very core of our faith. How we respond to those challenges will be our testimony. How we respond to the challenges of our lives is how we testify about our faith. And we don't have to say a word.

The human capacity to develop endurance is a gift. It's in our DNA. It flows through our veins. Each of us can develop endurance, no matter what level of fitness we might be in now. And I mean that physically as much as I do emotionally and spiritually.

We don't have to be marathon runners to improve our endurance levels. It only takes a few steps each day, and in time, we can go from being out of breath after 2 steps, to walking for hours without a break. We don't have to be Olympic athletes to have endurance, we only need to be faithful children of God, living our lives faithfully with Isaiah's vision as motivation.

Jesus will come again. The end times will come when God decides. But in the meantime, we must endure. In the meantime, we are called to testify in the face of our fears, in triumph over our disappointments, and in spite of our losses.

What you endure might not be what I can endure. And what I endure might not be what you can endure. The details aren't important. What *is* important is that we live our lives as God puts them before us, with faith and with gratitude. What *is* important is that we understand that the way we live our lives in the face of the world's challenges *is* the way we testify about our faith.

Isaiah's vision of the new heaven and the new earth is out there somewhere in the future. But before we get there, we'll have to get through our Savior's vision first. I thank God that we are so wonderfully made that we are designed to build endurance in the face of the world's challenges, because I know that by our endurance, we will gain our very souls. Amen.