

*A Light in the Darkness*

Sermon for the Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B

November 14, 2021

Trinity Church, Asbury Park

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*Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down” (Mark 13:2)*

Eleven years ago I was in the third and final year of seminary when I overslept and nearly missed out on history. At about 7:50 am on a late October Friday morning, my phone rang. It was one of my classmates, calling to inquire about my whereabouts and plans for the next 10 minutes. She reminded me that I was scheduled to officiate morning prayer for the seminary community in, oh... 9 minutes and 30 seconds. Yikes. “I’ll be right there!” I jumped out of bed, threw on the first items of clothing I saw, grabbed my vestments, and sprinted across the campus. I caught my breath in the sacristy as I donned my cassock and surplice and marked the appropriate pages in my prayer book, and then as the clock struck 8, I calmly walked into the chapel, took my seat and led my peers and professors in what turned out to be the last service of morning prayer observed in the nineteenth century chapel. You see, at 3:55 that afternoon, I was reading in my room when I heard sirens. Fire trucks. I walked outside where I could smell the smoke and then as I walked onto the main lawn, I saw flames engulfing the chapel. Soon, the fire trucks were pouring water onto and into the structure, trying desperately to keep it from spreading to the neighboring buildings. By now pretty much everyone on campus had gathered to watch the fire and the work of the firefighters. We were all stunned, and most of us had tears in our eyes when the roof collapsed. This was the place where our community had gathered to pray for almost 130 years. As we watched the destruction and the efforts to keep it contained, we began to form a circle, and we held hands, and we observed a time of silence amid all the noise around us, and we prayed.

*When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs. (Mark 13:7-8)*

This gospel reading speaks of wars, natural disaster, and famine. Terrible things. But even in the midst of death, destruction, and darkness, we are called to hope. The reading today concludes with an ambiguous statement: "This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." Birth pangs? Wars, earthquakes, and famine are birth pangs? How can this be? The traditional answer is that the apocalypse ushers in the reign of God on earth, and there is great joy and hope in the anticipation of that ultimate breaking in of God's power that will redeem the whole creation. But there are also signs of new birth in the here and now. And we can see them at work because of the great work of redemption by Jesus Christ through his life, death, and resurrection. A month or so after the fire that destroyed my seminary chapel, the Dean wrote that:

*The paradox of the Great Thanksgiving [of the Eucharist] is that we are invited to thank God for the tragedy of a young man dying in his early 30s in Jerusalem. To give thanks for tragedy sounds so counterintuitive. But we do so because we believe, we affirm, that divine grace is present in the midst of tragedy. This is the Christian conviction: God is present in the hardest of moments. In the Great Thanksgiving, we affirm the greatest gift of all: that the tragic is the path to our redemption.*

The destruction of my seminary chapel was, in the end, not a terrible tragedy. No one died. No one was injured. But Christians are sacramental, and outward and visible material objects are for us signs of inward and spiritual graces. And I do not believe it is so different outside our faith. Great cultural treasures tell our story, who we are as a people. And so, when prized buildings or objects are destroyed in war or disasters, we mourn these as losses to civilization, gaps in our collective memory.

“Divine grace is present in the midst of tragedy. God is present in the hardest of moments.” When my seminary chapel was destroyed, it was an unfortunate loss of history. But it brought people together and gave new meaning and richness to our common life and worship. Some of the most treasured memories I have of seminary worship took place in the space we made into a temporary chapel for the

rest of my third year. The service of Evening Prayer held that Friday while the embers of the fire were still burning was one. We closed that chapel service by singing the hymn “Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah.”

*Pilgrim through this barren land.  
I am weak, but Thou art mighty;  
Hold me with Thy powerful hand.  
Bread of heaven,  
Feed me now and evermore;  
Bread of heaven,  
Feed me now and evermore.*

The words of the hymn remind me that the Bread of Heaven can only feed us because of the life and death of that young man who died in his early 30's in Jerusalem. The Christian story gives us strength to persevere, to turn from the darkness of anger and despair and look for hope because ours is a story of hope when everything seemed to fall apart. Jesus was crucified, his closest followers denied ever knowing him, and all seemed to be lost. But then Easter came. Jesus was resurrected and experienced new life. And like Jesus we too can seek to build new life even in difficult times. As today's reading from Hebrews says, “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering...And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.”

This is the message of our Stewardship Campaign theme song.

*Christ, be our light!  
Shine in our hearts.  
Shine through the darkness.  
Christ, be our light!  
Shine in Your church gathered today.*

In a world deeply in need of God's love, we are called to share it. Beginning here in this church, in our worship and fellowship, and then when we leave this place. We are formed as disciples here so that we can go out into the world and make a difference. That's why our deacons dismiss us each week with words such as “Let us go forth in the name of Christ” or “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord,” and why we respond, “Thanks be to God.” And why these statements are often, particularly here at Trinity, accompanied by a joyous “Alleluia, alleluia.”

Today, we answer the call to serve the church and the world with our gifts of time, talent, and treasure. This is our Stewardship Sunday, when we gather all of our pledges and dedicate them to God on the altar. Trinity Church needs your support to answer God's call to serve our community and our world. We are a sanctuary of hope and healing. God's unconditional love is practiced here.

I'm now going to invite us all to share a moment in silence. If you have not yet had time to think and pray about your pledge for 2022, now is a good time to do so. If you already have but want to think and pray about it a bit more, now is a good time to do so.

Let us pray...

*[A moment of silence will be observed.]*

May our encounter with the Risen Christ in the bread and wine here at this table, and inside each and every one of us, the Body of Christ, give us strength to go into the world and share our love. May Christ be our light, shining in our hearts, shining through the darkness, shining in the church gathered today.

Amen.