

## When Temples Fall In<sup>1</sup>

Matthew 21: 12-13; Mark 13:1-2; John 2: 13-21

My sermon is about Jesus' "cleansing of the temple", and about his warning of the coming horror of the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem that would happen 40 years later. And, it's about when our temples fall in. Personal, religious, political temples. What do we do when temples fall in? Is hope around? Can something like resurrection happen?

1

Let's set the stage. Jesus did. His entrance was a carefully prepared prophetic action, riding through the gate expected for the Messiah, not on a war stallion but a donkey, fulfilling the words of Zephaniah:

Tell the children of Zion,  
Behold your king coming to you,  
Humble and mounted on a donkey.

Jesus was a new and bewildering kind of king, a servant king, and a new and unexpected kind of Messiah, a suffering Messiah.

He entered the city of David, and the crowds shouted their Hosannas and sang, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!"

His little ones who said yes to him, little ones of all ages, were waving palm branches and scattering their cloaks before him.

But when the holy parade was over he strode to the temple and cleansed the temple of the money changers and pigeon sellers. Some call it “The Temple Incident”, others, the “Temple Tantrum!” It was the final provocation that sealed his fate.

A brief note. The gospels differ in their chronology of the event. Mark places it on Monday, the next day after spending the night in Bethany. John places it early in his ministry. Whenever it happened it was a major disruption impossible to ignore. “Something must be done about this man!”

## 2

When Jesus entered the temple he turned over the tables of the money changers and pigeon sellers. Mark adds this arresting detail: “And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.” In other words, *He called off church!*

Then he joined prophetic action with prophetic words—the prophets often did—and quoted Jeremiah:

It is written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer”, but you have turned it into a den of thieves. (See Jeremiah 7:1-7)

When Jeremiah said those words to the temple authorities, he was not criticizing the worship liturgy but condemning the collusion between the temple and the throne as they perpetrated a pervasive system of injustice, injustice that robbed food from the children's tables, the oppression of widows and orphans, the oppression of foreigners in their midst and the shedding of innocent blood.

Jesus had such things in mind as he shoved over the tables. Religion that robs the poor is no religion. He had quoted the prophet Hosea:

“Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’, says the Lord.”

Justice, mercy, compassion, not your cherished order of worship, pomp and ceremony. Can you see now the virtual inevitability cross? Danger hung in the air.

### 3

Jesus come to us when our temples fall in. And there is a promise of hope in the midst of it.

Jesus saw it coming, the destruction of the temple and city of God. 70 AD. It would be an unimaginable horror. Rome's armies attacked. The whole Temple Mount in a sheet of fire and the temple, thought inviolable, falling. Over a million Jews were slain, among the two million as they came for Passover. The priesthood abolished, the Sadducees no more, only the Pharisees were left, who

by miracle of God built from the ashes Judaism as we know it today. We praise the God of Israel —and give the Pharisees their due!

Mark's gospel records that when Jesus and his disciples left the temple the disciples looked at the glorious temple and said, "Teacher, What wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!"

And Jesus gave his darkest prophecy: "Not one stone will be left unturned. All will be thrown down."

The massive stones of the triply walled temple weighed multiple tons. They were set so precisely you could not get a knife between them. But they would all come down.

What of our temples have fallen in? Childhood dream temples. Our Religion temple, our growing up religion no longer working, that we may build a new and viable faith.

Our perfect Family temple that has come falling down; or our Health temple perhaps. We have no indestructible bodies.

What about the temple of the Self, our Self Almighty. We grew up with an idealized picture of the self, made an idol of it, put it on our mantle, and it has come tumbling down.

What about our Race temple in America? We had the germ of white supremacy in our nation and religion from our beginnings. The white church by and large has been an incubator of white racism. Now there is even a date attached, 2042, when our nation will become a majority/minority nation with people of color outnumbering Caucasian people.<sup>2</sup>

The Race temple is tottering, and for some, a panic has set in. A revival of white supremacy groups has surged in the last 6 years, and there is a determined political movement to insure white minority rule.

What about the Church temple, the temple of Christianity. And there is another date attached, 2070. That's the projected date when there will be more non-Christians than Christians in our nation. Another panic has set in, and we've seen of late a Christian Supremacy movement, the goal of which is the encoding into law one set of Christian values. Having lost faith in the power of moral suasion, they are intent on turning our pluralistic democracy into a theocracy, which would have been anathema to our nation's Founders.

The fastest growing group in religion surveys are the NONES, those with no religious affiliation. Young people are leaving the church in droves. They've seen the hypocrisy of the church and fear the Church joining arms with the State to enforce a particular Christian way of life. Russell Moore, once the head of the Ethics Division of the SBC, now editor of *Christianity Today*, was forced out

because his political positions challenged the prevailing politics of the Convention. He said that the reason young people are leaving the church is not because they no longer believe what the church teaches but because the CHURCH no longer believe what the church teaches. That's surely part of it.

Some rail against the rise of secularization and secularism as the great enemy of the church and nation, but the great Rabbi Abraham Heschel said it well about 60 years ago :

It is customary to blame secular science and anti-religious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declines not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed.... When the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendors of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the voice of authority rather than the voice of compassion—its message becomes meaningless.

“Teacher, what great buildings are these, what great stones.”

When today the temples of our institutions seem about to fall in, what are we to do?

I promised hope, and the hope comes from Jesus and the God of Resurrection. In John's gospel, where the cleansing of the temple comes early, the religious authorities challenge him as he is leaving the temple: "What sign do you have to do this?" Jesus said,

"Destroy this temple, and in three days will raise it up."

They said, "It has taken 46 years to build this temple, and you will raise it up in three days?" John, then inserts his commentary: "But he spoke of his body", and adds, "And later his disciples remembered what Jesus said after he was raised."

God is the God of Resurrection, of new life, even new institutions, rising from the ashes. *God salvages from the wreckage of our lives the beauty of our lives.*

The institutional church is being shaken to its foundations. The real church, the true church will endure and thrive once again. The shaking is for the revealing of the true church always present, though sometimes hidden.

In 1963, Martin Luther King entered Birmingham for another non-violent, civil rights march and protest. He had hoped that the religious leaders in the city would support him and those with him. They read the same Bible, shared the same Lord. But just before he arrived, eight leading clergymen wrote an open

letter to the city, opposing King and his non-violent social action. In their public statement they said that it was “untimely and unwise.”

After he arrived King was put in a Birmingham jail, and from the jail he wrote a letter inscribed on paper smuggled into the jail. It was to become one of the great letters in American history, “Letter from A Birmingham Jail.” It was written on April 16, 1963, almost 60 years to the day from today.

In the letter, he spoke of the noble tradition of non-violent protest against unjust laws, and one by one answered the clergymen’s attacks on him. It is a masterpiece.

Over and over he expressed his deep disappointment in the responses of the city. “I had hoped, we had hoped”, he wrote in a litany of lamentation. But his greatest disappointment was reserved for the white church and those he called “the white moderate.” He wrote,

I have almost reached the conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride to freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council and the Ku Klux Klan but the white moderate who is more devoted to “order” than to justice.... Small understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than the absolute misunderstanding of people of ill will.

He spoke like Jesus in Jerusalem those last days:

I have looked at the South's beautiful churches with their lofty spires and found myself asking, 'What kind of people worship there? Who is their God?'

But King would not succumb to despair over the church. He gave thanks for those ministers and laypeople who joined him, sometimes at great cost and risk. He spoke of his love for the church despite its slowness to respond to injustice. And he spoke his hope in what he called "the inner spiritual church", the "church within the church", the "true ecclesia."

We today need not fear the statistics of the decline of Christianity and organized religion. The hope of the gospel has always been not the great institutional structures but in the inner spiritual church, the church within the church. Sometimes small is beautiful in the kingdom's churches, and disorganized religion has the step on organized religion.

I've served small churches and large, some with tall steeples and some with small, one with no steeple because somewhere along the years weather had destroyed the steeple, and they didn't have the money to restore it. And our church with its small steeple in bad need of repair. (Brother, can you spare a dime?") Stanley Hauerwas has said, with his characteristic needle, that we should

all join “dying churches” because they are the ones who don’t have enough money to defend themselves against the gospel.

What I’ve found in all the churches I’ve served is an inner spiritual church, a church within the church which has kept the church alive and thriving. Our goal is never to lose touch with that dimension of who we are. Please, I’m not talking about two kinds of members, some truer to the inner church than others, but to us all here. What will *we* choose to be?

What Jesus may be saying is that when temples fall in, God is at work building new ones. What needs to die so that the true church can be raised as from the dead? Here is the great hope of Palm Sunday, the day the crowds sang Hosanna, and the tables of the temple were turned over, and Jesus spoke of resurrection around the corner.

When the Hebrew people were in Babylonian captivity they grew fearful and despondent and cried out to God, “Why are you not coming to save us as in the past?” And God spoke these bracing words: “Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. For behold, I am doing a new thing! It now springs forth. Do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19)

Jesus is giving us eyes to perceive today. Resurrection is on the way .

Daybreak is near. Amen

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1. With thanks to Carlyle Marney, whose sermon by this title still has force with me, even though I can't recall his words.
2. Brittany Farr, "A Demographic Moral Panic: Fears of a Majority-Minority Future and the Depreciating Value of Whiteness" *University of Chicago Law Review Online*.

Also, Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (N.Y.: Random House, 2020), 315.