

Navigating Change

Malachi 4:1-2a

Psalm 98

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19

Did you hear that the United States will no longer be minting pennies? The final batch was minted Wednesday. Their value has apparently become four times less than the cost required to produce them. Even with a thing as inconsequential as losing the penny, it's unsettling to navigate changes to things that seem unalterable.

When the disciples were walking with Jesus in the temple courts, they must have felt the same way. Jesus was talking to them about the temple's looming destruction. Have any of you been to the Old City of Jerusalem? When I visited, I got to see The Wailing Wall, which is a fraction of a section of the original wall supporting the temple mount. It wasn't until I went on a tour underneath the excavated sight of the rest of the wall that I began to truly grasp the implication of Jesus words here.

King Herod was a megalomaniac. Everything he did was designed to secure his power and political influence. Most of what still stands visible in Roman Judea from the first century was built by Herod. In an effort to gain favor with the Jews, he designed and constructed their new temple. If you will recall, Solomon's temple was built about 1000 years before Herod and stood for 400 years before the Babylonians destroyed it and took the people into exile. When the exiles returned, they built Zerubbabel's temple which was shabby in comparison, but did the job, and it stood for 500 years. Herod was not legitimately interested in temple worship. He was interested in his own glory. So, he expanded the temple mount, which originally was a relatively small, temple-sized worship space. He built a stone base around the platform, forming a wall that increased the area to the size of roughly 26 football fields and could be seen from miles away as travelers approached. The stones at the base of the structure are mind-blowingly massive! A single hewn foundation stone is longer than this room and twice my height.

For centuries that land has been battled over and every time there was a war in ancient times, the builders would start afresh on top of the rubble. Today, the ground is higher so the wailing wall exposes a section of the wall that is less than half its original height and a tenth of its length. When I toured the excavated section under the wall, there was a place where we walked on plexiglass over a crevasse where one of the smaller stones had fallen part of the way down and lodged. It could have fallen another 40 feet lower if it had fit. It remains lodged there as a testament to the scope of a seemingly indestructible world that had indeed been altered forever.

One of the ironic things about today's gospel is that it was written down after the temple's destruction. The people reading these words would still be feeling the seismic shock of their world's utter destruction. The disciples walking in the temple courtyard were looking ahead with confusion and incredulity, but those reading it, had experienced its world-altering reality. Not only was it shocking in its scope on a material level, but this was also the first time in six centuries the Jewish people would have been without a place to offer sacrifices and be reconciled to God. Luke was writing to help people understand that God is not shaken by the things that shake us, and to offer a way through life-altering change.

The other ironic thing about today's gospel is it sounds like a bait and switch. Jesus starts out explaining how to know when the end times will arrive. You can just see everyone press in to hear the secret. But remember that the people reading this had literally just experienced the end of the world. It was the end of the world as it had been known for millennia, and its end felt like Jesus' description. When Jesus describes the end times, he basically describes what they had just gone through. He describes the experience of human history, the same things that happens over and over again. He offers no special insight. You can almost hear the collective sigh of disappointment. Not helpful Jesus.

But that is his point! It's as if he's saying, life on earth will always be this way, and because it is, rather than looking for the emergency exit to escape it, here is how to live through it. In

every age, as the world as we know it comes to an end, as the unimaginable happens around us, this teaching is what will sustain us. We want to find an answer to escape it, but Jesus offers us an answer for how to live it.

Jesus always starts from the fundamental position that his people exist for the sake of his kingdom. In the world he describes, things are a bit more black and white than we experience. His followers would be killed for their faith, whereas our allegiance to God's kingdom is typically more a question of how much time or money we will skim off our excess to devote to kingdom work. From Jesus' position, there is an assumption that all people's faith will be threateningly interrogated. The threats we face are not life or death, but they can feel that way when we face rejection and loss. Weirdly, rather than instructing us to concoct a thorough testimonial or defense for our faith, Jesus tells us NOT to do that. In fact, knowing the human propensity for overthink, he tells us to make up our minds to not prepare a response. This teaching flies in the face of logic.

Rather than plan, Jesus' instruction about how to live through the destruction of our world, is to listen. Jesus promises that he will give us the words to say, the way through, but we must listen close enough to hear. If you've never been through a life altering, world ending, experience. Let me tell you, the noise is deafening. Hearing Jesus' voice through the external chaos of so much change and the internal chaos of so much pain makes hearing Jesus very difficult. Pro tip, since we are promised that we will experience these world-altering moments, if we want to hear Jesus in the midst of them, we must practice listening to Jesus now. We are not to prepare what we will say or do, but we are meant to prepare ourselves to hear.

When Paul addresses the Thessalonians, he is essentially giving the same instruction. For the record, he is not moral shaming people. He's addressing the social reality of the patronage system of the Roman world. It was accepted as normal for people to attach themselves to wealthy patrons. The "client" would offer loyalty, public praise, and favors

and the patron would provide social status and wealth. It sounds an awful lot like our economy of networking. Like Jesus, Paul bucked societal norms, insisting that our loyalty must be to God's kingdom which will always put us in opposition to the world's norms. His instructions privileged Christian dignity and witness over societal norms.

When Paul stands opposed to idleness, that word means "not in battle order, irresponsible, or not submitting to the proper order". Our allegiance must be to God's kingdom. The work Paul indicates that we should be doing refers to the physical, mental, and spiritual labor necessary to position ourselves so that we can hear and respond to our true king. Interestingly, the word for "work" indicates legitimate exertion. Christian preparedness is internally and externally sweaty work. Ironically again, that labor is also its own safeguard against weariness. Paul's readers lived in troubled times and their response, like us, was to ping between overexertion from panic, or inactivity from burnout. Paul's remedy was to encourage them to connect themselves with others doing the kingdom's work, avoid those who would drag them into disordered living, and take encouragement through shared effort in listening to and following Jesus.

Echoing the same theme, the Psalmist encourages us to sing a new song. New means "having recently come into being". We recite these ancient words to encourage ourselves, but we also need to sing our own newly minted songs. When we listen closely to Jesus, we will find new encouragement to face each day. If our hearts feel panicked or burnt out, perhaps we need to look closer for God's presence and comfort ourselves more intentionally through hearing Jesus' voice.

Jesus' concluding words say, "by endurance you will gain your souls". The word soul means exuberance, happiness, and energy. Steadfast faithfulness through attentive listening is our entrance point into vibrant life, even when navigating the end of the world.--
--May we be a people who steadfastly position ourselves to hear Jesus, who experience

the joy of knowing him, and find our way into spiritual vitality even if the world as we know it comes to an end.