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Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA

This past July, on our way around Vancouver Island, Linda and I tucked into a protected harbor with five other boats at the aptly named Hope Island. This small island lies just off the northern tip of Vancouver Island, and boaters use its harbor to wait on a weather window in their preparation to round Cape Scott on their way south. While we waited on our own weather window, we hiked a rough trail through the woods to the exposed shore on the north side the island. There, we discovered a high, steep beach covered in what must be millions of small rounded stones, heaped up for 30 to 50 feet above the tide by waves sweeping in from the Pacific. The stones varied in size, but most were about the size of my fist. They were so numerous and so deep that we sunk down into them as we tried to walk. At the water's edge, the smallest stones seemed to sing as the water rolled over them and they tumbled in the gentle surf.

As we hiked back to the boat, these stones led me to reflect on the forces and the time required to render them so smooth and rounded. And, as I reflected, I began to think of those stones as a metaphor for my own life, of how the rough and tumble of living has, over time, rubbed at least some of the sharp corners off my personality. But then I thought, this could be both good and bad. It can help make me more sensitive to others around me and perhaps to fit in better socially, but it can also leave me scarred and temper my own individuality in the process. Like the constant waves rolling onto that beach, life can bear down on us, molding and shaping us, and sometimes leaving us stronger and more adaptive or sometimes just worn down and confused.

The stones of the Temple in Jerusalem also had a very definite metaphorical quality about them. Jews were very proud of their Temple and, even though they may have had reservations about the motivations of the Jewish leader who had restored it (King Herod), it remained the center of their religious and political lives, occupying 25% of the land area in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus. Those stones symbolized the fervent hope of Jews that God would return to Zion after centuries of continuing exile to vindicate them and help them fulfill their destiny in the world. The strength of this hope, and the intense longing associated with it, may help us realize just how scandalous Jesus' prediction in today's Gospel lesson must have sounded when he said that "not one stone will be left upon another" and that the Temple itself would be utterly destroyed. For Jews, this would be like saying that God had abandoned them. For us, it might be like seeing the Mall in Washington, DC, laid waste by an enemy or a natural disaster—all those symbolic buildings and monuments of our history flattened, trampled, and perhaps wiped from living memory. So, this was *very* strong language and Jesus knew it was when he made his prediction.

As was so often the case, however, the followers of Jesus also want a sign about *when* the predicted destruction might happen. Jesus doesn't give them a definite answer, but he does go on in vivid language to describe clues they can look for: wars and insurrections; nation rising against nation, kingdom against kingdom; earthquakes, famines, and plagues; and, finally, unspecified great signs in the sky (or heaven). But then, he says, *before* the end finally comes his followers will be arrested and persecuted because of him. They will be betrayed by their parents and brothers, by relatives and friends, and some will even be put

to death. Many will hate them, simply because of their association with Jesus. What should we make of these predictions?

Sadly, from our vantage point in history we know that these predictions largely came true, though some biblical scholars believe the authors of the Gospels put these words into Jesus' mouth in light of the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 AD. But others have argued that such a prediction would be entirely possible for any Jewish prophet "worth his salt," that is, one who was watching as the Jews repeatedly agitated for their freedom and, by doing so, deliberately antagonized the Romans. What perhaps may need more explanation for us today is the strange-sounding apocalyptic language Jesus used for these predictions.

We typically believe the apocalyptic language in the Bible refers to the literal end of the world, but it is perhaps better viewed as a way of symbolizing the religious or theological significance of a historical event. The destruction of the Temple by the Romans was so devastating that the Jewish faith has, in some very real ways, yet to recover from it after almost 2000 years, and such language helps convey this awful significance. Instead of the literal end of the space-time world as we know it, apocalyptic language signaled the end of the "present age" and the beginning of another. Jews distinguished the present age from the "age to come" in a similar way we distinguish time before Christ and after Christ. The age to come—the kingdom of God as most Jews understood it—would begin when God came once again to the Temple and Jews were fully restored from their exile; everything before this event is considered the present age. With his dire warnings, Jesus was suggesting that the predicted destruction of the Temple would be *the beginning of the end* of the present age. The new age would arrive

in pain and struggle, like a mother giving birth. But, it was not clear how long it would take for the new age to fully come, for this baby to be delivered; hence, Jesus' emphasis on endurance: "By your endurance, you will gain your souls." That is, by enduring the trials and tribulations at end of the age, his followers may be privileged to see the arrival of the age to come—the arrival of the kingdom of God as Jesus understood it.

This past week, I met with the preschool children for their once-a-month chapel. We met in the church and I was trying to help them see a connection between sitting around a table at Thanksgiving and gathering around the Lord's Table for our Sunday worship. So, I asked them if they saw anything in church that reminded them of their Thanksgiving meals at home. They pointed to the candles and the flowers, and they even noticed the "table cloth" on the altar, but they missed the table itself. So, I blurted out, "You're missing the elephant in the room!" Big mistake. The teacher immediately rushed to my aid as the kids began looking around wide-eyed for an elephant. "He's not talking about a *real* elephant," she said. Well, there's an elephant in the room this morning, too—with all the symbolism that elephants hold for us politically—and I can't conclude this sermon without addressing it.

I suspect that many of us are tempted to think of the events surrounding our election this week in apocalyptic terms. If you voted for Mr. Trump, you might think a new age has finally arrived; if you voted for Secretary Clinton, you might see her loss as a sign that the end cannot be far away. Time will tell, and personally I am taking Secretary Clinton's advice to keep an open mind and to give Mr. Trump a chance to lead. We will, as you will note, begin praying for him in this

morning's Prayers of the People as the President-Elect. But it's also important, I think, to consider the stories we tell ourselves, for these stories condition our reaction to events around us.

For Jews, the stones of the Temple were a metaphor that the unthinkable would never happen, and yet Jesus warned them that, in fact, the unthinkable could indeed happen, and we know that it did. For me, the smooth stones that endured many, many centuries of tumbling about in the surf were seen as metaphor for how life can bear down on us, but I couldn't decide whether it was good or bad metaphor, or whether it could be both good and bad at the same time. Metaphors, and the symbols that inform our stories, are often like that—ambiguous—and in light of this ambiguity we need to be cautious in how we interpret them and use them.

Also, I want to suggest that there is an implied question lurking behind Jesus' dire prediction in today's Gospel: In what, finally, do we place our hope? National and religious symbols, and movements associated with them, may wax and wane, but Jesus is asking us to place our hope in God and, yes, to endure, but to endure with hope and not simply with resignation. We heard last week from the Sermon on the Mount how we are to wait and work for the kingdom of God to fully come—we are to love our enemies (or, in this case, our opponents, whether they are Republicans or Democrats), we are to do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who abuse us. Those were tough words to hear and act on in Jesus' day and they're not any easier for us. But what I didn't say last week is that many commentators also view these same words as a program of non-violent resistance. As far as we know, Jesus never advocated violence, even in the face of extreme injustice, but he did advocate

non-violent resistance—in our world, Gandhi likely learned it from Jesus and Martin Luther King learned it from both Jesus and Gandhi. So, let us not lose hope as we endure the present uncertainty and the changes that are likely coming. And if we must resist some of those changes, let us do with respect and with non-violence towards those who differ with us.

I want to conclude this morning by asking us to turn in the Book of Common Prayer to page 833, and reading together the Prayer Attributed to Saint Francis.

Let us pray.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. *Amen.*