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St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
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“It is humankind’s nature to place its faith in perishable things. Yet God is always doing something new; recreating life from the destruction humanity imparts upon itself and all creation.”

Isaiah 65: 17-25

2 Thessalonians 3: 6-13

Luke 21: 5-19

Psalm 98

Three years. That is what scripture and biblical exegetes suggest is the length of Jesus’ ministry. Three years: from start to finish. Within that short time, Jesus managed to annoy the political authorities, exasperate the religious authorities, and exhaust his closest followers. Many were perplexed with his antics and words, while others were drawn to his charismatic personality. In three short years, he managed to alienate the religious traditionalists while simultaneously empowering the disenfranchised and marginalized. Jesus took something old and made it new again and the stalwarts of tradition were incensed. First century Judaism, under Roman occupation and control, found an irritant in an itinerant preacher who seemed to relish upsetting the proverbial apple cart. That is what visionaries do after all, and Jesus was a religious visionary of unique talent.

He envisioned a world where the glamour of power and the influence of wealth were upended by the liberating and empowering effect of unconditional love. A transgressive love that lifted the destitute from impoverishment through compassionate hospitality. A radical love that welcomed the outcast with nonjudgmental acceptance. A gracious love that healed the sick, touched the untouchable, raised the dead into new life, and embraced the unorthodox in the community as children of God. For Jesus, orthopraxis was essential to establishing orthodoxy: right practice leads to right teaching, and vice versa. His teaching was not an either / or dichotomy. It was a both / and agreement.

Situations can be precarious. We can plan and organize ourselves according to our preferences, but they do not always accord with those Christian values espoused by Jesus. We get a tiny reminder of that when Jesus speaks about the grandeur of the Temple, an edifice of human engineering built to withstand time itself. No matter how improbable it may seem, no matter how well constructed a building is or how established a custom becomes, nothing is permanent. All things pass with time. All things age. All things change. I have only to look in a mirror for affirmation of that.

Throughout his ministry, those three brief years, Jesus taught his small flock to focus not on the temporal or physical, but on the ephemeral and spiritual; and to do so by practicing a way of living that honors the Author of Life itself. When we genuinely put into practice what Jesus teaches, we too will be the scorn of civilized life for being the radical dreamers of an equitable society; for being an irritant to the established way of doing things.

I recently shared a quote from Br. Geoffrey Tristram of the Society of St. John the Evangelist where he addressed the notion of nostalgia where he writes: "living too much in the past, filling our days with nostalgic memories, remembering past experiences which are no more, can actually be very damaging to our emotional and spiritual lives." His words are pertinent in that they capture the essence of what the author of Luke is articulating as well as that of today's Isaiah passage.

Luke's eschatological language in today's gospel is not lost on his audience. Luke writes, as do all the gospel writers, post destruction of the Temple. Rome suppressed an insurrection in Palestine that left Jewish identity in shambles by destroying their Temple. Their pride and vanity, their privileged status as God's chosen people did not stop this event but may have exacerbated it. And Luke reminds his followers that they too will be persecuted for being disciples of Jesus and that calamity would befall them before God's reign is fully realized. I can hear the lamentation now as they pine for the way things used to be. How the glory of a nation was captured in Temple life, in the Temple structure itself. That is the nature of impermanence; for only God's love is permanent and everlasting. It is God's *hessed*, a Hebrew word that is near impossible to translate, but translates best as "steadfast love." God is the faithful one, the One who constantly demonstrates fidelity. It is humankind's nature to place its faith in perishable

things. Yet God is always doing something new; recreating life from the destruction humanity imparts upon itself and all creation.

“I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered...rejoice forever in what I am creating.” These words taken from what is termed third Isaiah since the entire book was written over a generation and encompassed at least three different authors, speaks to a people upon their return from exile to their homeland. Things, however, are not as they imagined they would be, or as being as they were before their exile. How could they be? The remnant of people left behind after the Assyrians forced most of the population into exile tried to maintain some semblance of ritual identity and custom while those in exile, influenced by foreign customs and religious practices, develop their own rituals from memory. It is amazing how nostalgia can color one’s understanding of the past. Thus, Isaiah imparts upon the people the vision of God renew and recreating life, not as it was, but as God intends it to be. And it is challenging to say the least.

In three years of ministry, Jesus imparted to his fellow Jews, that God is at work in their midst, crafting something new. That clinging to the past may bring comfort to some, but it does not address the injustice that exists, brought on by pride, stubbornness, and vanity, the very substance of infidelity to God’s *hessed*. The world has not changed all that much since First Century Palestine. Empire is alive and well; we even live in the midst of it. Religious institutions seek to maintain its influence and status while political expediency fosters want and need for the many, all in an effort to comfort the few and the privileged. It all blinds us to God’s steadfast love that is renewing and recreating life in our very midst. We are only too blind, too stubborn, too arrogant to see and understand that God is creating new heavens and a new earth; one predicated on justice and love and humility. We have only to open our hearts and minds to that *hessed*, to see and understanding God’s faithfulness. That is what we are invited to be part of; to what we are called to participate in as the Body of Christ. We are called to lifted the destitute from impoverishment through compassionate hospitality; we are called to welcomed the outcast with nonjudgmental acceptance; we are called to healed the sick, touched the untouchable, and raise the spiritually dead into new life in Christ. We cannot do that if we cling to the past, to the way things once where. We can if we accept that the former things have

passed away so that God can create new heavens and a new earth built upon God's *hessed*. We are in service, as disciples of Christ, to that *hessed*. We are to bear witness to it in all our living.

And thus, today, let us pray: "Lord, keep us from following the gods of pride, stubbornness, vanity, sloth, greed, and comfort that beckon for our allegiance every day. You, O Lord, brought us through the night watches, you who neither slumber or sleep. We pray to follow you, O Christ, along the path of generosity, humility, and love (*hessed*) throughout this day and the days to come." Amen!!!