

Luke 21:5-19 2013

The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker

The Good News of Destruction

"When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

I think most of us have a pathological fear of destruction. Once something has been built, whether it is a relationship, a building, a form of worship, a faith community, or even a self-image, we have a very hard time believing that it should ever change.

We are especially fearful when we hear of any kind of change, even if it is good, that would require the destruction of something already familiar and in place in order to bring about renewal.

I think this is one reason why my imagination is sometimes captured by the Hindu god Shiva. Now, I have to say right away that I have no deep knowledge to share about Hinduism and what I am about to offer pretty much exhausts my knowledge! But I have happened across Shiva in books I have read and I am fascinated.

Shiva is the third god in what is essentially the Hindu trinity or triumvirate. The triumvirate consists of three gods who are responsible for the creation, upkeep and destruction of the world. The other two gods are Brahma and Vishnu.

Brahma is the creator of the universe while Vishnu is the preserver of it. But, Shiva's role is to destroy the universe in order to re-create it.

Hindus believe his powers of destruction and recreation are used even now to destroy the illusions and imperfections of this world, paving the way for beneficial change. According to Hindu belief, this destruction is not arbitrary, but constructive.

For whatever reason I find this permission, or even this invitation to pray for the "constructive" destruction of something old so that something new can be born in its place very bold and liberating.

"Constructive destruction" sounds like the granddaddy of all oxymoron's or maybe actually the beginning of a good parable!

But, as challenging as we in our culture seem to find this notion, I think our Biblical tradition is actually redolent with this same understanding.

As Jesus is telling his disciples about the destruction of the Temple it is probably a concept that they can barely comprehend. And the images of the destruction to come before the world would finally reflect the fullness of God's beauty, truth and justice are horrific to contemplate.

But Jesus tells us: "There will be wars, insurrections, earthquakes, famine, plague, dreadful portents, great signs from heaven, persecutions, and even betrayals from close relations.

Yet, Jesus' main message to us in today's Gospel reading is not a message of war, famine and death. What Jesus tells us most clearly is "Do not be terrified, for these things must take place, but what my life will teach you is that new life awaits at the end of even the most horrible death."

Jesus' death and resurrection will become the master lesson in the art of God's re-creative power.

His death and new life is meant to be the pattern for us all. It is God's promise that at the end of one thing, God stands ready to do a whole new thing. Even the destruction of Jesus' earthly life marked the beginning of God's eternal promise that new life would always be birthed out of death—any death.

But Jesus is also clear that none of this changed the fact that there would continue to be trouble in the world until that time when all that robbed us of true life was destroyed once and for all and we could finally receive the world God's hopes for us.

And I think it is so important to pay attention to the fact that when asked to name signs of the end of this current age, Jesus said that we should not be led astray into fear or anxiety by the many painful things that can and will happen in a world where God's mercy and justice are not yet fully realized.

Jesus told his disciples these things while walking in the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple has been the controlling context of Jesus' activities since he entered Jerusalem.

Jesus cleanses the Temple of those who sought to make worship of God a commodity, he encounters hostile questions, and he denounces the Scribes and points out the generosity of a poor widow whose faithfulness outstrips those who see her as nothing.

The Temple is where Jesus belongs by virtue of who he is. And yet, this is where he is most unwelcome because he challenges its corruption and pretentiousness.

As the disciples comment on its beauty, Jesus announces its destruction. This great Temple dedicated to the one true God was destroyed just a few decades after Jesus' resurrection and not many years before Luke wrote his Gospel.

As a religious institution it had become blind to its own intended mission and Jesus points out that no matter how beautiful it is, it comes to a sad end when it ignores the very One for whom it exists.¹

Jesus' life will continue to teach us, if we let it, how to live without fear in a time when all that we want to cling to—for good or for ill seems to be slipping away.

Whether we are afraid of a death of a relationship, a way of life, a long held social belief, a political ideology, or the way we understand church, Jesus urges us to consider that clinging to dead things out of our fearfulness of what might be next is a painful existence.

He teaches us that none of these things is beyond God's power to recreate in new, life giving ways—not without grief or some feelings of loss perhaps, but, if we let go of fear the promise is that we find something infinitely more life giving.

And I think it is also important also to recognize that just because something needs to be allowed to die or be destroyed in order to make room for something new, it does not always follow that what we must let go of is bad or has never been without value, deep meaning or purpose.

But no one thing is meant to be the one way or one answer for a lifetime or even an eternity. Not in institutions, relationships, or in all of life. We see this illustrated beautifully in God's created order: even beautiful, wonderful things need to die in order for other new and wonderful things to spring forth.

And because of God's re-creative power not even a wrongful destruction, like that of Jesus on the cross, can kill God's ability to recreate something breathtakingly magnificent in its place.

¹ *Texts for Preaching, Year C*, pg. 601.

Jesus warns his disciples that they will face persecution and death, but paradoxically, not a hair on their heads will perish. How is that possible? How can one be both put to death and not have a hair on their head perish?

It is because Jesus' promises of new life out of destruction will more than likely come through the death of something rather than some magical promise of transformation without pain or loss---just as Jesus' own resurrection came only after the pain and agony of being put to death by those he came to love.

Jesus never promised a fullness of life without the destructive powers of pain, suffering and loss. But he teaches us that he would be present in that pain, suffering and loss and that the powers of destruction in our own lives are very often about simply destroying the illusions and imperfections of this world, paving the way for beneficial change.

So I guess I end with questions for all of us. What in each of our lives needs to be destroyed so that newness can enter? And, as we vision for our future as a faith community, what is calling for destruction so that our new life can emerge?

Jesus promises to be with us in whatever we face. "Do not be terrified," he says, "These things must take place." Can we bear witness to God's re-creative power in this time of travail, precisely when the new future cannot be seen, and even when it seems improbable? Can we, in our present time, trust Jesus and the "Good News" of destruction? Amen.