

You can always tell it's close to the end of the church year because the readings get pretty intense. It starts getting apocalyptic here and it'll carry us straight through the first Sunday in Advent—only two weeks away!—when we hear about people being taken and left.

But today, we get “nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.” And cautions about natural disasters. And warnings about coming persecution, arrests, and betrayal. And to kick it all off, some commentary on the temple itself: “the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”ⁱ

It's hard for us to understand the radicalness of this statement. It's tantamount to blasphemy. As modern Christians, we know that the temple has, in fact, been destroyed. It never had the same place or piety around it that it did for the Jews of Jesus' time or even, in memory, for the Jewish people of today.

The temple was *the* center of religious *and* political life. There were so many rituals and faith practices that could *only* be done at the temple. After carrying around the Ark of the Covenant for so many years, this temple was finally built as a real house for God, a place where God would dwell and where God's people could be sure to be in God's presence. It was the holiest of holy places and the mere notion that it might not last forever was the same as implying that *God* might not be around forever.

So, yes, we don't have a temple to look to in the same way that those first-century Jews did. But we have a whole bunch of other institutions that we put our faith in, don't we? A whole bunch of other institutions that we put our faith in *above* even our faith in God. And it's not necessarily the same institutions for all of us.

For some, it might be a community group or organization.

For others, it might be their school.

It could be a job, a company, a professional organization.

It could be our local, state, or federal government.

It could even be, bear with me, the Church itself.

The Church is an institution like so many others. *Unlike* others, God has promised to be present, but it is still an institution full of people who make mistakes, who have prejudices, who want to protect themselves, who are occasionally misguided, and who are subject to sin just like the rest of us. It does great things. And it has done and continues to do some really...*not* great things.

But when we think of these institutions that shape our lives and shape our way of thinking, we usually take comfort in them staying the same. We know, for the most part, what we can expect, or at least what our history has taught us to expect.

...So how do we react when things change?

When the temple was destroyed less than a century after Jesus made these remarks, it required a fundamental shift in the way that Jewish people expressed their faith. There were so many things that could *only* be done at the temple! What were they to do?

What resulted was an incredible rise in the rabbinic tradition and the further influence and significance of synagogues. These were no longer just local places for the faithful to gather when it was not a pilgrimage festival, they became *the* center for Jewish life.

As we look at the institutions around us, what does it mean when things change? How do we react?

I'm going to look at it from an angle that is relatively low stakes, at least for most people: sports.

There are a *lot* of different sports. Team, individual, professional, races, games, scored competitions. All kinds. And each and every one of those sports looks different today than it did when that sport was first invented. Rules added or adjusted. Clarifications passed. Procedures to protect athletes.

And, you can bet, that with every change and adjustment, there was outcry. "You're changing the game!" "That will make it too hard/too easy/too confusing!" "Why can't we just do what we've always done?"

The example that comes immediately to mind for me is in Major League Baseball. Since the game's inception, it has relied on a home plate umpire to decide where a ball crosses the plate: is it a ball or a strike. Now, however, every TV broadcast and sports app has their own strike box up that can show, almost instantaneously, where that ball landed. It's led to one site that gives umpires a scorecard after each game, rating their accuracy. Sometimes it's quite high, sometimes it's abysmally low. Sometimes it seems to impact the outcome of a game, other times it doesn't.

All of this is to say, in recent years, there has been a push to have strikes and balls called with technology, not with a person, to eliminate the human factor. I'm not here to debate the merits of one option or the other, but the amount of people who simply eliminate the idea all together without even considering why someone might think it's a good idea because it would "ruin the the game," is astounding.

We don't like it when our institutions change in ways we don't expect or that we don't like.

But change is a constant. No institution can remain the same forever, at least not without dying and embalming itself in nostalgia.

Aside from the pilgrimage festivals that were celebrated at the temple every year, the other reason the destruction of the temple hit the Jewish people so hard was because this was God's dwelling place. The place they had built for God and the place God promised to meet them. And so when there was no more temple, they had to seek out God in other places...and God sought them out, too.

In time, those faithful mourning their temple, embraced finding God out in the wild. What was a horrific loss led to some inspired new ways of living.

As we look at our institutional church, we can look at all the change that has come about in the last two and half years.

I remember back in March of 2020, when I thought we were only going to be out of our sanctuary for two weeks, I remember being terrified and anxious about how in the heck we were going to do worship together.

But I livestreamed our Sunday service on Facebook from my dining room table with a five month old Owen in my arms and we made it work.

And then we figured out Holy Week, with a dinner devotional Maundy Thursday, pre-recorded Good Friday, and Zoom Easter Vigil.

And, we just kept figuring it out. Did I like the change? Absolutely not. But it needed to happen and we made it work.

And now, I can look back and see some of the benefits that forced adaptation brought:

Folks whose only communion and main connection with their church home had been coming from visits from their pastor and *maybe* a lay visitor? Now they could join back in!

The parent with a small child who wanted to join the midweek evening Bible Study or a committee that meets in the evenings but couldn't because they needed childcare? They could hop on Zoom when their child went to sleep!

The college student or young adult who moved away from home and hasn't found a new community but wants to stay connected? Easy to do!

And that says nothing about the technology learned that continues to impact and improve our communication and ministry in a variety of ways.

And so, when faced with change and uncertainty, we can wring our hands, worry, despair how the institutions around us aren't the same as they once were...or we can listen to Jesus and focus on what matters.

Because *Jesus* tells us it's going to be okay, in the end. After all his dire words, even admitting that some will be put to death, he comforts us: "But not a hair on your head will perish."

We can be challenged, pressed, mixed up, lost, even put to death, but God will have the last word. When the stones tumble down, God will hold us fast.

Amen.

ⁱ Luke 21:6.