

Soul-Gaining Endurance
Luke 21:5-19
November 13, 2106
Rev. Stephanie Ryder

Please join me in prayer, and sing with me if you know the words to the song:
Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, help me stand, I am tired, I am weak, I am worn; through the storm, through the night, lead me on, to the light, take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

I know for some, it has been a difficult and confusing week, and for others, a relief, and others, celebratory, and others, sad or devastating. The lectionary passage today could not be more timely, because even though there are many varied individual responses to the election results, I think we can agree that the world was surprised by the Trump victory.

I read and meditated on the Gospel passage from Luke on Tuesday night instead of watching the election results. I didn't want to be caught up in the frenzy. At 10:30, before the final results were in, I took a walk outside, and looked up at the moon, and the night sky, and the clouds. And it was the same moon that would be there the next night, no matter who won the election. The world would go on. God would still be God. And this gave me comfort. My faith would still be in God, and not the political candidates or outcome.

In the passage from Luke read today, Jesus foretells of destruction, persecution and betrayal. It begins with Jesus advising against idolizing things of this world that are temporary. People are admiring the stunning temple, the beautiful stones and adornments, and Jesus says, "The days are coming when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

The writer of Luke characterizes Jesus as a reliable prophet whose words were proven true by historical events. The book of Luke was written about twenty years or so after the destruction of the Temple. The Temple in question is Herod's temple, known as the second temple. This was a grand expansion of the reconstructed first temple, Solomon's temple, which was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, and rebuilt after the Jews return from exile, completed under the rule of Darius the Great in 516 BCE.

Herod's Temple was a remodel, constructed in 19 BCE and completed in 63 CE. Worship was held there during construction, and it was in this temple that the 12 year-old Jesus was said to have astonished the rabbis, when he stayed behind and had his parents worried sick. It was apparently a sight to behold, enlarged to a site of 35 acres. Just seven years after its completion, in 70 CE, it was destroyed by the Romans.

In Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple, he distinguishes between the end times and historical events. He reveals that the temple will come to an end but that this event is not THE end. The people listening ask, "How will we know when the destruction of the temple is to take place, and what will be the sign?" Jesus says horrible things will happen that will seem like the end of the world, and many will come and say the time is near, and Jesus warns them not to buy into the fear and anxiety, not to fall for it.

Jesus answers, "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified." He mentions also nations rising against nations, kingdoms against kingdoms, earthquakes, famines and plagues, dreadful omens and great signs from heaven. Do not be terrified, for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately. We don't know why they must. But this is what he says. There is going to be destruction of the temple, and many other appalling things. There is going to be terror and destruction... do not be terrified.

There will be persecution. Followers of Jesus will be arrested, persecuted handed over to the courts and imprisoned. Although it sounds horrendous, Jesus presents it as an opportunity – an opportunity to testify! This is our Savior, the one who sees how God can use any circumstance for good, especially those that don't appear to be so. Jesus is offering his hearers then and now a faith that is so strong, it can persuade us and others of the spiritual reality. That God has the power through Jesus to make a way out of no way.

Jesus says that those accused don't need to prepare their defense, their witness, their testimony in advance, that he will give them the words, and the wisdom, that will leave the accusers stunned and speechless. When we have a relationship with Jesus, and faith that God will come through for us, we are given exactly the strength we need in the moment. What a promise.

Lastly, Jesus says there will be betrayal. Betrayal even by parents and brothers, relatives and friends. Some will be hated, some killed because of their faith. Do not be terrified, Jesus says, this is not the end. "Not a hair on your head will perish." It seems contradictory, that someone could die, but yet the hair on the head won't perish. Remember from last week's reading: The age of resurrection doesn't look like life as we know it today. Jesus in our tradition is both fully human and fully God. Thus, he knows life on earth and life in heaven. He knows both physical and spiritual life intimately.

This leads us to the last line of the passage, which is the crux of it all: *By your endurance, you will gain your souls.*

Jesus has just foretold the suffering, the destruction of what is held dear: the sanctuary of the beautiful and beloved temple; the security of the culture and society that will be overtaken by war, rebellion and revolution; the stability of the earth shaken by earthquakes; the health of the population overcome by hunger and

disease; individual freedoms removed with imprisonment, betrayal, hatred and death.

By your endurance, you will gain your souls.

The Greek word for endurance is broken down by the root words *hypo* meaning under and *meno* meaning remain, and is defined as “steadfastness, especially as God enables the believer to remain under the challenges God allots in life.” Hmmm.

I was reminded of a fundraiser held in Marin every year at the Marin Civic Center, called, “Stepping Out to Celebrate Life.” It is a fashion show, and all the models are breast cancer survivors. The proceeds benefit local nonprofit breast health organizations and families throughout the Bay Area who are affected by breast cancer. I have been to the event a couple of times, as my mother is a breast cancer survivor. I sat in the audience and watched in admiration and through sobs and tears as model after model stepped out radiantly onto the runway, beaming with life, beaming with victory, beaming with hope. Some were still in treatment, sporting a beautiful gown and a bald head. They were upright and proud, and God’s glory through them was evident.

The first time I went, I was struck reading the bios of the models in the program. There were about thirty models, and nearly every single one said something to the effect of, “My life has changed for the better because I had breast cancer,” or “I am grateful for having had breast cancer because my priorities have changed and I live my life so differently now.” I pondered this for days. I pondered how I would live my life differently, what would I change or rearrange. I shared this conundrum with a friend who responded, “Stephanie, you can’t possibly understand, because you haven’t had breast cancer. You haven’t been through it, fought the fight, struggled through chemo and radiation, felt like you were close to death.” I was humbled. This is true. I could not know, nor even quite imagine, because I had not been through it.

I have been through many other struggles, though. I have known fear and hopelessness and I *have* felt close to death. This is why I am grateful to have the tenets of the Christian faith, to help me through times of struggle.

Musician Thomas A. Dorsey was born on July 1, 1899, and eventually became known as “the father of black gospel music,” combining Christian praise with jazz and blues rhythms. He was also known for innovating the standard hymn from one that traditionally incorporated the individual by way of group belief, into a personal perspective referring explicitly to the self, and the self’s relation to faith and God. The prayer we sang together moments ago, was written by him. It is the most renowned of the 400 blues and jazz songs with which he is acclaimed. The song, *Precious Lord, Take My Hand*, was written from grief.

Dorsey's wife Nettie died giving birth to their son in 1932, and two days later, the baby died. He wrote this song in grieving response. The song was recorded by hundreds of singers, including Elvis Presley, Mahalia Jackson, Aretha Franklin, B.B. King, Roy Rogers and Johnny Cash. Being a favorite of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., it was sung at the rally held the night before his assassination, and per his request, at his funeral. It was also a favorite of Lyndon B. Johnson, and was sung by his request at his funeral as well.

After the tragedy of loss and the writing of the song, Dorsey opened the first black gospel music publishing company after being discouraged by the treatment he received from the established publishers. He founded the National Convention of Gospel Choirs, which is still prospering today, 83 years later.

I think Thomas Dorsey's experience, and the history of this song, is what the Luke passage is about. Dorsey's faith brought him through his trial, and he gave testimony through the writing and publishing of the song, that has benefited others for decades since. Endurance: steadfastness, especially as God enables the believer to remain under the challenges God allots in life. Dorsey was challenged, and through his faith, endured.

Jesus says, "*By your endurance, you will gain your souls.*"

Soul, or ψυχή (psoo-khay') in Greek, is defined as the vital breath of life, and corresponds to the Old Testament word for soul, *nephesh*, meaning the direct aftermath of God breathing or blowing the gift of life into a person, making a unique individual with a distinct identity. Further definition of the word reveals "The soul in so far as it is so constituted that by the right use of the aids offered it by God it can attain its highest end and secure eternal blessedness, the soul regarded as a moral being designed for everlasting life.

Thomas Dorsey died in 1993, and it is said that every feature of the annual National Convention of Gospel Choirs that he founded was designed for the betterment of the Christian singer, instrumentalist, educator or leader and purposed for the individual to be spiritually motivated to live the message of the Gospel song.

One commentator on the Luke passage writes, "It's easy to be overwhelmed by the fear, anxiety, evil and suffering in the world. It is also easy to be overwhelmed by the grand scope and challenge of the Gospel and its vision of a restored world. But, in the midst of these two overwhelming realities is a simple, but powerful response – the contribution that is made by a life of daily discipline and faithfulness to what is right. Such small contributions, when put together, make a significant difference in the big scheme of things. Our worship and our life together as a community of faith provides safety for those who are under threat, provides belonging for those who are excluded and judged, and provides nurture and support for those who are in need of spiritual resources."

Remember from last week's reading, the faithfulness of God in whom none is dead, but all are alive forever (Luke 20: 38). The endurance of the people of God in the face of circumstances that appear defeating is a sign of the underlying faithfulness of God. In losing our lives for Christ's sake, we shall truly be found. By our endurance, we will gain our souls.

Janice Still, one of the founders of the Stepping Out to Celebrate Life fundraiser for breast cancer says, "When we began this project in 1996 we just wanted to help each other. In helping each other, we helped ourselves, and we developed strength and encouragement and support for so many others." A few women diagnosed with breast cancer rallied together and created an event that has raised over \$4.5 million to fund services for breast cancer patients.

We are encouraged by the Gospel reading to stand firm and to speak out. We are not to remain silent; a world of violence, warfare and oppression gives us "an opportunity to testify." We are to testify to God's faithful presence, God's redeeming love, God's desire for justice for all across the face of the earth. Jesus assures us we do not need to come up with the words in advance; they will be given to us by faith.

We sang the first verse of Tommy Dorsey's song, *Precious Lord, Take My Hand*. Let us sing together the second verse, #834 in the hymnal: *When my way grows drear, precious Lord, linger near, when my life is almost gone; hear my cry, hear my call, hold my hand lest I fall, take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.*