

Sermon for Proper 28C
St John's, Gloucester
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If you stand in a building or on a mountain or in a field, you are standing on the past, the present, and the future. Every place you go has a history, it has today's expression, and tomorrow it will be different again. Take St. John's, for instance. It is a building that has been here in some form for nearly 160 years, with prayers said and hymns sung and communion received by different people over generations. Before that, there may have been other dwellings on this site, or it was a field or forest and before that maybe camps for the indigenous people who lived and fished here. Tomorrow and in ten or fifty years, will St. John's be here? If it is, it will be different.

The two readings today talk about place—a future place, a present place, a past place. All of these are intertwined. Both readings refer to Jerusalem and the site of the temple, the place that is “home” and “home base” for the Jewish people. In the Isaiah passage, the prophet holds out a vision for the future—for a new Jerusalem, where fields and vineyards prosper, where people have stable housing and healthy children, enough to eat, and peace. The reason the prophet holds out this vision because it is exactly what the people DON'T have.

Their past was Exile in Babylon, and then an arduous trip back to Judah, and then the hard work of rebuilding the city's walls, reclaiming the fields and vineyards, and facing the utterly destroyed ruins of the temple. They are now “home,” but home is a mess. Other people took over the land, and they are mounting attacks on the Jewish people. There is a shortage of food, and better-off people are taking advantage of their brothers and sisters by making them pledge houses and land in return for food. Life is hard, and people are turning towards local gods and rituals for comfort, instead of towards the God of Israel.

Their present is full of hardship and chaos. Hence the vision of a New Jerusalem. No more weeping (like the present), no more infant mortality (like the present), no more of building houses and having to leave them (like the past and the present), no more planting and others eating, no more raising children just to have them hit with calamity. Rather, God will provide what is needed and anticipate every prayer; there shall be peace and prosperity.

In the Gospel, the disciples are amazed at the present wonder of the Temple; Jesus responds with a prediction of the temple's destruction and all the upheaval that will be associated with that time. This, we know, happened in the year 70, about 40 years later. However, the Gospel of Luke was written AFTER that time and looks back on Jesus' prediction, knowing that his words came true. There will be wars and insurrections, famines, earthquakes and plagues AND you, the disciples, will be persecuted for your faith. Luke knows that these have happened or are happening in his time, and that they will apply for future generations as well. Yep, that's what the present and future will hold. It's not the end; it's just a lot of bad stuff. But if you hang in there and stay faithful, God will be with you and supply everything you need, even what words to say.

Both passages speak to unsettled, difficult times that are either coming or already upon the hearers. Both take the long view about this particular place and God's relationship both to it and to God's people. By the time of Jesus, Jerusalem has been inhabited for at least 1000 years. It has been a great city; it has been destroyed, its inhabitants carried away to another country. God brought the people home; God allowed them to rebuild. Life was hard, but God was there.

Jesus stands in the temple, knowing keenly that it is both a place of great devotion and holiness, and great greed and corruption. He knows that Jerusalem will again be subject to the violent power of empire, the temple again destroyed, the Jewish people again scattered. He knows that he himself is facing certain beating and death, and that his disciples—now and in the future—will face attacks, beatings, arrests and death. That is the price of being faithful. Their home, our home is not in a building or a city or a place but in community with other people of faith and in the heart of God.

Fast forward a few thousand years. We're in a different part of the world and a much different century. But the words of Jesus seem eerily close to home—insurrections, wars, earthquakes, famines, pandemics and maybe a few extra wildfires, floods, nuclear threats, and species extinctions thrown in for good measure. Most of us have been Christians—a dominant religion in the dominant culture in this country—for many decades, where life for us was relatively tranquil and our faith accepted and not tested too much. But life is changing—drastically-- and maybe now we have the opportunity to experience what Jesus was talking about. Not only terrible external events, but also backlash for following the Way of Jesus—consequences of opposition and suffering because of our faith.

These are challenging times, which means we are now experiencing more of what most of the world has lived with during most of history. So how do we react? In times of great personal and community suffering, facing hardship, illness, isolation, oppression and poverty, how do we react? A few years ago, I read a book called [The Last Policeman](#) (by Ben Winters). The novel is set in Concord, NH, where I have lived. In it, an asteroid, 2011GV1, is hurtling towards the earth and will hit with devastating consequences in about 9 months. It will likely cause the end of human life. The novel follows policeman Hank Palace as he copes with human reactions to the coming end.

And, as you can imagine, some people react by living it up—quitting their jobs, eating and drinking wildly, abandoning themselves to as much pleasure as they can. Others take whatever they can get for themselves, robbing, destroying, acting out of anger and fear, going over to the dark side. But some form communities, serve others, live consciously and carefully. Many return to practices of faith. Many live with honor and compassion, even in the face of certain death. Office Palace continues to work as a policeman amid the chaos, and continues to pursue justice, even though it would seem a futile act. It's a well-written look at the ways people tend to deal with any calamity or hardship, even if not the end of the world.

It is in hardship that we really find out what we believe. It is in difficulty that we find out what our faith is, and isn't. Jesus tells us that challenges and hardship are par for the course, and as Christians we should expect them. This does not mean that God has abandoned us or that we are terrible people. It means that life is full of difficulty. How will we react?

At the stewardship lunch this week, when we were checking in about how people are feeling about the present and future of St. John's, one person said, in essence, "I'm overwhelmed by all the change that we have been through" and listed all staff changes and ups and downs and concluded by, "And then you're going to leave," meaning me. And that gave me pause. Yes, St. John's has been through a lot in the last 2 ½ years. All of us have been through a lot, and frankly, we're ALL tired of change. We're tired of pandemic, and we're tired of news that alternates from awful to horrible, and climate change and economic woes and housing shortages that only seem to get worse. St. John's has been through online services and isolation to in person and hybrid; Bret left, there were months with no one priest, a new interim priest, Mark leaving, interim time, Joe coming, ups and downs with the Thrift Shop. All of this is true. Our wardens and staff have done amazing work, but they are TIRE!

But what I said in response was—"Yes, there have been a lot of change. You are right! But look at all the positive change!" Because what I see in November 2022 is a very different, and I would claim, even BETTER, St. John's than when I came in September of 2021. You were still fairly new at worshipping in person; now we've been offering in person and live streaming for nearly a year and a half, through Delta, through Omicron, missing only one in person Sunday service. The leadership has been wrestling with deep questions of who St. John's is and what the future might be, and has stepped out in faith to call a full-time priest in charge. We have weathered Mark Nelson's leaving, and not only weathered it, but widened participation in the planning of music and worship. We have space for new things, and new music director to help dream and plan with us. The visioning team has been meeting for nearly 6 months, and has been unlocking creative imagining for St. John's. They'll be reporting to the vestry this Tuesday, and I know that one suggestion is that they keep meeting after the formal program ends. The Thrift Shop is thriving with a new assistant. The commitment to collaborating with and service the Cape Ann community is strong, and we will be joining with St. Paul's Lutheran church for a quiet, grief-focused service on Dec. 15.

So I see and feel the change that we've all gone through, but I see the strength, the determination, the ability to be community and work together as followers of Jesus. I'm not sure how much all of that would have come forward if there hadn't been upheaval and loss. And frankly, I don't think life is ever going to be simple or easy again, either for St. John's or for our world. We're in times of crisis—in our lifetimes, we may never get to equilibrium again. Church-attending Christians are a minority, considered by younger generations to be weird or a real throw-back. And that's great! Faith is more than belonging to a social club.

We are invited to turn even more closely to God, to put our trust even deeper in God, to hold even faster to the promises of God. To cling to the visions of good and right and justice, which are the visions that God gives us through the prophets. And to be people who are able to pray for ourselves and others, to support each other, to remind each other of God's goodness. As a community, to endure through hardship. In this place. Now and in the future.

May God bless us with strong hearts, deep faith, and committed endurance, so that in everything we may see God's working and in difficult times we still be a people of gratitude and hope. Amen.