**St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church**

**Portland, Oregon**

**Proper 28 Year B**

**1 Samuel 1:4-20**

**Psalm 16**

**Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18), 19-25**

**Mark 13: 1-8**

**Not Hard for God**

Buildings. Tall, short, made of granite or wood….steel or canvas….magnificent edifices built to soaring ideals or run down shacks offering refuge from the cold….all are built with particular intention and purpose…….lasting to offer up secrets of ideas and ideals fulfilled or ideas and ideals gone awry.

15 years ago, I was in North Korea, as a guest of that government, following NGO humanitarian work in progress there, and it was hard to ignore the immense buildings standing on specially built streets in Pyongyang –great white shining palaces, libraries the size of a small White House, yet home to very few volumes. Monuments and residences – usually punctuating purposefully designed tree-lined highways – and all erected by and for and in honor of the then Eternal Leader, Kim Il-sung, the Supreme Leader, and today for his son, Kim Jong-il. I was invited to stay in the guest palace, a huge marble and granite white house, built to accommodate 100’s of guests, and where all foreign guests of the government stayed. There were three others in my group, and we were the only ones there. A generator ran the electricity we needed when we were in residence...and the water ran sometimes....usually cold. The doors were locked at 10:00 p.m. and unlocked at 6:00 in the morning. During the day, while at the guest house, we could only walk to the border of the outside gardens, which were quite lovely. There wewould be met by armed guards who had little use for our obvious privilege and perspective on what we were seeing. So, while at the mansion, we were more than just guests of the regime, a reality amid the facades that followed us everywhere we went, since our papers were confiscated upon entry to the county.

The guest house was empty, like most of the other buildings, with only a few office workers moving back and forth in the downtown area. Most of the population was the rice paddies, which stretched as far as the eye could see, just beyond the borders of the city. Working from sunup to sun down, the workers were treated to the sound of continuous patriotic music piped out over the paddies. Back at the guest house, movies about the Dear Leader looped on a large television screen in the cavernous lobby. I wondered at the time, how long the buildings would last after the Supreme Leader was gone, and from what I can tell from a distance today, the buildings are still there under the new regime, and are no more occupied than they were when I was there. But one wonders for how long. Will their walls simply wait out time until they crumble from disuse and lack of purpose? And I wonder if the will of the people will outlast the meaning of their grandeur or will time run out for them before they are able to see them fall?

I recall, too, my visit to Liberia a decade ago. Here the buildings and activity in the streets provided a sharp contrast to those in Pyongyang. The roadsides of the capital city of Monrovia were crowded with people, all working at whatever they could do, in order to survive. Nevertheless, they too, were surrounded by large buildings everywhere, but in this place, the buildings were already in crumbling disrepair or partially destroyed by bombs and bullets......without running water or electricity or even window glass. Most were surrounded by razor wire ....to keep people out. I wonder if the buildings will be rebuilt one day, or if they will be simply left to continue their slow decay until they fall in on themselves at last. Will the will of the people live beyond the meaning of their damaged buildings.....or will time run out for them before they are able to see the buildings rise again from the ashes of war and despair into a future of renewed hope and continued peace. We have witnessed firsthand, here at St. Aidan’s, huge containers filled with clothing and other supplies, put together by our other congregation Kingdom Harvest. Many members of the Kingdom Harvest congregation will be leaving for Liberia next week, following the container, and will distribute these much-needed items to the least of these in the name of Jesus Christ.

Sitting across from the temple on the Mount of Olives Jesus responds to his disciples as they remark about the magnificence of its stones and walls..... “Do you see these great buildings?” he asks, “Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” The disciples want to know where and when this will take place and want to know what to watch for...want Jesus to give them a sign, a warning that will let them know how to predict when the temple walls are going to tumble down.

The answer Jesus gives seems apocalyptic.....seems to point to some kind of final outcome but....rather it is a lesson in the reality of the present...the reality of the results of a violent world, mindless territorialism and desire for power. There have always been those who would call themselves leaders in order to surround themselves literally with halls of luxury at the expense of countless others who suffer for their building.

There have always been those who, through their own cowardly lust for some kind of esteem or recognitio, would plunder, ruin and rape the homes and institutions of their own country and its population, simply in order to make a show of power by building monuments to themselves.

Since before the destruction of the temple that stood before Jesus and the disciples so long ago, this is a truth in a world that has always been, and will continue to be always and at once, entering into destruction and hoped-for renewal.

There has not yet been enough time for human beings to figure out that none of these edifices are desired by God, whether the buildings be made of stone, or exist in the depths in our hearts. It is only when we stop using these devices to get our own way.....only then....will we begin to bring ourselves to the door of the peaceable Kingdom......only then will we realize how to begin to usher in the Reign of God.

Jesus does not give us answers about when disasters, earthquakes, tsunamis or other challenges are to happen in our world. They have always been with us and always will. Rather, he points us toward a way of life that can sustain us through these challenges....a way of life that can rebuild our homes on a solid foundation of faith rather than mistakenly thinking we are made safe simply by building our walls, physically and metaphorically higher and stronger than any others.

Jesus is sending us a message to hold on to our faith as we go forward in the face of all that comes and is to come our way......and instructs us firmly how to recognize the true way and not to be misled by false promises of those who say they are coming to bring us salvation.

He is warning us to be far more vigilant about the work we are called to do and who we are called to be – as we work to fulfill God’s promise of hope to a frightened and confused world, and less concerned with building taller towers as a comfort to our egos.

Jesus reminds us to be wary of false leaders who will lead us astray. When we remember to walk in the Way of God and only then, will we will begin to gain insight into the light of hope and salvation.

“I have set the Lord before me because he is my right hand and I shall not fail”, says the Psalmist.

As God's people, we are called to respond to crying families who have been torn apart by imposed boundaries or war when nations rise up against nations, when tsunamis and earthquakes sweep away dreams, when terrorists strike out of misguided zealotry, when people who have been thrust from their homes are herded into camps and left to die of hunger and thirst. It is to this world we are called to respond in a far greater way than we ever have before.

This strong message from Jesus to his disciples and to us today, is to be aware of how we are to be in the world – unafraid, courageous and confident, armed not with bombs and a show of might in our walls, but through and with the ultimate power of a just, loving and merciful God. With God as the ultimate leader...the ultimate power, we need no longer be afraid or anxious but through faith and commitment we can turn our weapons into ploughshares and tend the fires of hope rather than setting alight the fires of war.

It seems like a tall order and beyond our capability and we ask ourselves how we can possibly make a difference......and yet we are called to start somewhere.

 To paraphrase Mother Theresa’s suggestion: when faced with a sea of need, simply start by taking care of the problem right in front of you.

If Jesus is using the demise of the temple as a metaphor for misplaced use of strength and power, what do we think and do about our own building – this house of God we call St. Aidan’s in which we come to worship. During our time away, St. Aidan’s has persevered through faith, and we have accomplished a great deal. We have connected to the world outside our doors by first erecting our Easter Cross in the early days of the lockdown due to COVID-19, and at the height of the pandemic, the Holy Spirit guided us to build a little kiosk to keep our food and clothing out of the weather. We might say it is enough. But Jesus would say this “but the beginning of the birth pangs....” It is a start. There is much more work to be done to the kiosk, so that it can be finished, and can do the work for which it was intended, fully and completely.

It is not just to be a shed to put food and other items, but it is to become a sacred place, recognized as a conduit between those in need, and those who can share. A place of refuge for the world-weary to find some inner relief and peace, comfort and escape. A place where people can speak their needs and be heard. Like this church building and all the buildings on this campus, it must provide a place from which people may find some sense of the power of God's grace to assist in their own journey toward renewed hope.

Jesus is calling us to be a place of new beginnings rather than clinging to what has always been. If ever there was a time for us to realize the meaning of building something new from the foundations of the past, it is during this time of emergence of the pandemic which is still toppling the buildings of the past all over this planet. As we pray for peace at the dawn of this global new age, we cannot ignore God's voice screaming in the wind for us to build back in a new way, in the way of faith and love......to cast away all that didn’t work, that was destructive before, and begin to rebuild for a brighter future. We pray that after all the speeches, meetings, collaborations and promises of COP 26 which ended two weeks of discussion about climate change, that all the destructive buildings that have guided our conveniences over the last few hundred years, will at last be allowed to fall. We pray for real change, real opportunity to right our wrongs against creation, even if it proves uncomfortable and inconvenient.

When the disciples asked Jesus to predict the future, his answer was to choose to follow the way of truth today. So, we start now. Now that we are here again in person. It is time for each of us look around and ask ourselves, what can I do, how can I contribute to building up the new awareness of this church’s responsibility to our community and the world. How will I uphold the work that St. Aidan’s is called to do and must do in the world, today.

 It is the time of year when we make our pledge to this community, we are to understand that when we give, we are giving more than just money to keep the furnace going and the lights on...although that is important....more than just money to pay for music, liturgy as sustenance for our souls, more than just money to pay for food for the hungry, for possibilities for prayer and study.....and all that is important, more than just money to ensure that this building will continue to stand, although that is important......but most important than all of these, is to understand that we give to ensure that the process of repentance, forgiveness and rebirth of possibility will continue...and that the walls of faith and hope will not yet fall....not on our watch...not here...not at St. Aidan’s.

“Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering…for he who has promised is faithful.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

 We make our offering to God so that we are able to carry out God's work in the world not for ourselves, but for the benefit of all God's creation.

It is the least we can do. And it is the most important thing we can do.

Even as we celebrate all that has happened here over the last 100 years, we must also be aware that the time has come, when the good work of St. Aidan’s must now become even more purpose filled and radically outward focused .... as determined and dedicated as Jesus to change the world.

Guided by the Holy Spirit, we are on the right track, but we have to build on our capacity to grow our time, skills and money as a statement of belonging to a community that wants to be radical and real enough to create a shift for a better, more loving world.

Now that we are able to be physically present again for our various worship services, our Bible studies, the Cuthbert Community, the Catechumenate, the IONA Book club, the Acolyte Guild, revitalized Anam Cara activities and on and on.....every time we meet, we must do so not just to show up as passive onlookers, but to go beyond our own settled desire to maintain the status quo, by allowing all these activities to prepare us in seeking new and more deeply fulfilling ways to continue building the reign of God.

We are gathered today in a simple and elegant building...built with love and care, not as grand as the buildings built on the backs of a suffering population, not bullet-ridden and beaten as those that have been ploughed down in a selfish greed for power, just a building that wants to enter the 21st century making a difference in the world. But Jesus reminds us that we have to look beyond a mere building, beyond beautiful appearances and be careful what we are worshiping. Our worship of God and our work in God's name must reach far deeper levels within our walls and far more constructively beyond them. A confused world....an angry world, a world seeking meaning and purpose awaits.

It was hard to read some of the signs in North Korea....all I saw were visible signs...ten-story high pictures of the Dear Leader – the self-proclaimed God leader of the North Korean people. By contrast in Liberia I saw a small Chinese building.....a shop.....nothing more than a lean-to really. The sign over the shop said. “Not Hard for God.”

“Not hard for God.” A sign that serves always to remind that God will persevere no matter what, or how much time, it takes. And, that, through faith, we can and will survive all the challenges of our world today and that through this unending faith, we may yet see a glimpse of the promised land....salvation through the Grace of God.

This is the core understanding of what is meant by stewardship. Within the temples of our own choosing, we make our decisions for the future.

We can choose to invest in building for a new day.....new birth....trusting that God is in control....

Or….we can choose to let the building fall….

May the purpose and focus of our journey of faith be stronger than the need to maintain the bricks and mortar that houses it, so that our good work in the name of God can be a force in the world. May that journey of faith and grace be so great that all buildings of violence and war that must fall, will fall, and all buildings of renewed hope and promise that must be built up, will be built up. And, may the building of souls, that is the Church of God persevere in the name of all that is true and may it transcend the test of time and be reborn into a new age of eternal peace. Not hard for God....and therefore not hard for us.

Written to the Glory of God

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“Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky…and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.” Daniel.

1. Hebrews 10:19-25 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)