

23rd Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 11.16.25

Isaiah 65:17-25

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.¹⁹ I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.²⁰ No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.²¹ They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.²² They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.²³ They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord— and their descendants as well.²⁴ Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.²⁵ The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

Luke 21:5-19

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said,⁶ "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."⁷ They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?"⁸ And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them."⁹ "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately."¹⁰ Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom;¹¹ there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven."¹² "But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name."¹³ This will give you an opportunity to testify.¹⁴ So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance;¹⁵ for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.¹⁶ You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death.¹⁷ You will be hated by all because of my name.¹⁸ But not a hair of your head will perish.¹⁹ By your endurance you will gain your souls. (524)

The Goodmans are skipping Thanksgiving this year. We're going to Toronto where they've already had Thanksgiving. (Canada has theirs in October.) We're meeting there, the boys coming in from Minnesota and Jesse and me setting out from the Berkshires on Tuesday.

This will be two days after my last Sunday here, which will bring to a conclusion twenty-five years of ministry for me here. It's not a joyful end, or perhaps not *only* a joyful end. It's a sad one (*also* a sad one) because it will be the last Sunday for the entire church. Two hundred seventy-five

years of witness in the hill-town that was first called Township #1 and that in 1848 split into two towns, Tyringham and Monterey, and this congregation will have breathed its last.

It's been a lovely run. I can easily say that even for the two hundred fifty years that didn't involve me. A book published in the 1950s, sponsored by the church and co-written by Julius Miner and Margery Mansfield, is entitled [*New England's Monterey: Stories of the Town ~ Its Church*](#). It must find its way to antique book shops because several people over the two and a half decades of my service here [in Monterey] have given it to me, explaining that they "found" it and bought it for me.

It's a sweet read, a testament to a time gone by, a testament also to this congregation having had a lovely run. And for most of that, as every congregational church in every village throughout New England, the church and town were tightly intertwined, the church often the context for working through and expressing public will set in a theological key.

When the first enslaved person was brought to Berkshire County, the church was roused to reflection on slavery's evils. When the first were brought to Monterey, "the church membership were aroused to action. The Church voted throughout the state that no slave-owner could be a communicant." This had the slave-owning family driven from Monterey to New York.

Similar political action took place when apple trees began growing everywhere, which made for lots of apples, which made for lots of cider, whose fermentation made for alcohol consumption on the rise, and even crippling alcoholism beset on a few key producers of a few key goods in the village. "Discouragement among the people [of intemperance] increased...With intemperance, poverty and sorrow were inevitable."

There's also talk of tides of membership. A decline in the late 19th century meets with seasonal bursts, when summer people became a thing in the early 20th century and brought with their season-long stay in this lake-strewn hill-town their church-going habits from home. Summer people these days seem to be looking less for social entanglement and demand, more privacy, less commitment. They don't really devote themselves to church here anymore.

But, see, Congregationalism, like democracy, demands a lot of its members. Everything a Congregational church manages to do is because of the dedication of its members. At its best, all that "doing" isn't merely toil, the performing of necessary tasks to keep something rickety from falling apart or stalling out, but the fruit of relationship, the doing of things *together* because that's how trust and affection deepen, which trust and affection produce still more life-sustaining fruits. A dynamic that sustains and builds up.

The Goodmans are going to Toronto on that after-death day because, turns out, one of my favorite bands is touring, [The Beths](#). They just released another album and, from New Zealand, they're on a world tour. Toronto, it seems, is a good city to put on a show when in North American and no one in the United States would have "rock concert" on their holiday agenda.

Well, almost no one.

Their new album: I love it. Entitled, "[Straight Line Was a Lie](#)," it's chock-a-block with good songs, not least the eponymous track. It's a short one lyrically, something repeated as if in a circle: "I thought I was getting better but I'm back to where I started. Yeah, the straight line is a circle. Yeah, the straight line is a lie. I thought I was getting better but I'm back to where I started. Yeah, the straight line is a circle. Yeah, the straight line is a lie." Repeated several times, and then comes the punch: "Guess I'll take the long way 'cuz every way is the long way. But I don't know if I can go round again."

And then, the drum kicks up and, around again: "I thought I was getting better but I'm back to where I started. Yeah, the straight line is a circle. Yeah, the straight line is a lie."

The toil of life. The beat of the turning seasons, a beat that's each time through a little faster than you can keep up with, while also too slow, the long way but too fast.

I had a friend in divinity school, successful, so successful. She was a maker of lists, a setter of goals. She was always on task in making herself better. Eating better. Working more efficiently. Up late, up early, perfecting the paper she would hand in. I remember feeling she'd taken me on as a friend out of some measure of pity. My mediocrity. My shrugging shoulders at the end of an assignment, getting the paper back: "Oh well. I learned a lot."

Interesting to note that her priesthood in a parish setting doesn't involve her preaching. She tried it, but it wasn't a good fit. A deadline every week, the result of which doesn't meet the demands of perfection. A sermon is always at best good enough, something never perfectly wrangled into shape. And then sloughed off because, you know, next Sunday's coming.

Next Sunday is always coming.

See, I saw her a while ago and, though it was good to see her, it was a weighty thing to find her evermore on her own case. Midlife is going hard on her. She's often unhappy with herself, her slow improvement, her nearly no-improvement. Each day: nope, she's still her. Each day: yep, still forgetting something, still hiding some imperfection or some incomplete task, still as if with a hair sprung loose of its tight bun.

I remember, as a girl, braiding my then long, straight hair. No matter how tight I made the braid, there'd always be that one sprung loose spray of hair. In fact, the tighter I made the braid, the more insistent that one sprung loose spray of hair. Made me crazy. Most often, halfway through the day, I'd let the whole braid loose. Whatever.

I asked that friend from divinity school once if she ever imagines herself from above, ever imagines something like a creative God whose currency is love noticing her, delighting in her, let's say besotted by her. Just as she is. (It was divinity school, after all. We were allowed to ask such things.) She wasn't happy at the question. Tearing up, maybe she wasn't happy at her answer.

We're in the Temple with Jesus now. He's been there for a few days; he'll be there just a couple more. Then will come his arrest—and then his trial, and then his crucifixion, and then his death. But even as of now it hasn't been easy. He'd had arguments with priests, scribes, Sadducees. He'd disrupted the buying and selling of animals for sacrifice—so-called cleansing the Temple. He'd told parables that were ever-more pointed, obvious critiques of the status quo, of those who exercised power, took part in systems that intimidate and exploit. And now he starts with this—the prediction that the Temple would fall. The Temple! This which was built never to fall. Having happened once, five hundred years back, to the warring power of Babylon, the original Temple arose again in this now 2nd Temple, built (again) as never to fall.

And, mind you, the Temple wasn't just an architectural show of might—though it was that. And it wasn't just a cultural show of might—though it was that, all the beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God. It was of something essential: the presence of God on earth, the indwelling of the Lord, really the site of connection between God and the world, the umbilicus as connects a mother with her baby in utero.

By this connection, the world in utero, held in God's womb, is nourished and sustained.

So, that this connection might come undone: what terrible death would that make.

Or what arduous birth...?

Life would be harder now for this now-born world, for this now apparently less dependent world, more self-reliant, more self-made even.

Or so goes the lie it would tell of itself: self-made, spinning off alone into a universe dark and expanding.

Jesus lived prior to such destruction, such new if arduous birth. But by the time of Luke's writing this gospel narrative, it had happened. The Temple *was* gone, reduced to smoking ruin at Rome's painstaking hand. The people were scattered, decimated in number and driven into the

hills and further still into neighboring nations. Eventually North Africa. In time, Eastern Europe. A wandering people, the Jews. A pilgrim people, the early church.

And history would unfurl. And there would be all sorts of reasons to be led astray, for false promise to arrive as just so promising, escape from the tumult, rescue from the turmoil. There would wars and rumors of wars, insurrections and even natural breakdown, earthquakes, floods. There would be every reason to think, with this, it's all over. With this, it comes to an end. Which is dreadful—the world ending! And also, maybe, something of a relief? I mean, how much more can we take? (Cuz I don't if I can go around again...)

Jesus speaks here to prepare his beloved people for a long journey. He would be leaving them. Dying and then rising and then ascending, he would be leaving them, which seems to concern him, certainly more than it concerned them—they who didn't know, who still didn't understand. Jesus, however, has seemed increasingly concerned, increasingly backed up against what he seems to feel as a deadline. In Luke, Jesus is very concerned with his people, very concerned with the fact that he will be leaving them and they will be on their own, moving through history and its travails.

On their own.

For a time.

Then they'd be rejoined, but by something less tangible than a man, less obviously present than a man, Jesus. They would be joined by the Holy Spirit—and that's not nothing.

This gospel narrative is the only of the four that has sequel, a second act. This gospel writer, the writer of Luke, would also write the Acts of the Apostles, the story of what comes next, when Jesus has gone, when the presence of God on earth has departed, and then has come again in the Holy Spirit which births the church.

Promising. Certainly not nothing. And yet Jesus seems deeply concerned. Would it be enough?

These words sound scary: wars and rumors of wars. They do to me, anyway. These, which turn out to be nearly parting words of Jesus for his people, words of warning for what awaits in the days, years, centuries, millennia ahead, following when Jesus will have departed and the people will continue on their way, the world will continue on its way: they sound scary.

But in reading them again, and again and again, always on the penultimate Sunday of the liturgical Year C, you come to see that what's being described here is history, simply history, if in

focusing on the worst of it. What's drawn out here in Jesus' near final words to those who would have to continue on without him, with though the Spirit of him in the Holy Spirit among them, are tides of history, all the many things that could freak us out and could cause to follow in a more misleading way or to respond to a more deceptive call. But if we endure through all these close calls and narrow ways, endure in faithful calm through all the "skin of our teeth" turns, then we will gain our souls.

We are a most adaptive species. That's good news when it comes to the need to endure—trial, suffering, fear, intimidation, all faced faithful to the way of self-giving love. That's bad news when it comes to the need to resist—deception, false promise, what's treacherous, what's cruel, perhaps acquiesced to as the "new norm," as just "the way it is."

The endurance Jesus counsels comes with the promise of the end. Though that end is declared as not yet, though that end is counseled not to be declared before its time and certainly not to be predicted before its time, there is an end and it is good.

I row, as you might know. I used to race, but I don't anymore. I never really enjoyed racing, and now I feel comfortable saying so. I don't much feel the need to prove myself anymore.

I've raced with coxswains in the stern who coax effort from rowers in sweep boats, effort in spite of what pain that will bring. I've raced with coxswains who can see the finish line and know exactly how many strokes until it's reached, how many strokes to coax from their crews until the bow-ball crosses it.

I've also worked with coxswains who aren't so skilled. "Power twenty to the finish," they growl through the cox-box. And they count down twenty, each press more buildup of lactic acid in the core muscles. And the crew comes to twenty, painfully to twenty, but the finish line is still away. "Power five," the coxswain says, and you just want to kill her. And once you cross the finish line you might.

Or maybe you'll paddle to the boathouse, and the lactic acid will clear the system, and you'll settle for throwing her in the water.

But by then you'll feel pretty good. Much relieved. Even victorious. The things of old will have passed away. Remembrance of pains past will have faded like a dream.

We're a most adaptive species.

The end is important. The end is crucial. Lots of progressive thinking forgets the end, lays faith in the process of progress and keeps its people ever in the grind. You hear this in the progressivism of modern politics, this which implies the perfectibility of man but which, several

centuries into modernism, is starting to look like it might not be true. We might not be perfectible, to say nothing of the creation, which isn't any closer to being a place where the wolf and the lamb feed together, and the lion eats straw like the ox; isn't any closer to being a place where none hurt or destroy. And so, the turn of history becomes toilsome, merely toilsome. We work and we work, and we're still us, and history is still history. And maybe it's a little better, a little more merciful, a little more abundant. But there's this chemtrail behind it, or this unintended consequence beside it, a causality in a ditch that we didn't have in mind, or that we did have in mind but figured the benefit outweighed the suffering.

But when history is seen as progress with no ultimate end, no final good purpose, then it's hard to get up for another go at it, for me at least.

It's all the worse when this sort of progressivism shows up in church, which it often does in the liberal mainline. It's often preached as up to the people to just try a little harder, just do a little better. Attend one more protest. Go on one more mission trip. Collect more food for more pantries because the government has given up. Give more. Do more. Save the children. Save the whales. Save the ozone. Save the meeting house. Save your own souls. We'll tinker our way to perfection, getting the wolves and lambs to eat together. Just one more try at making the lions vegan. Just one more turn.

I'd say for the members of the Monterey Church, one turn around the liturgical year had become one too many.

It's taken me a long time to get there. The church in any of its manifestations is itself a thing that's presumed as lasting forever. I know I never imagined myself in this position, laying to rest a congregation that's been around for 275 years. I've felt like a pilot trying to land an airplane with no landing gear. Churches don't have landing gear.

Or so I've been telling myself.

Turns out, we do. Unlike many of our contemporaries, those in the church do have access to landing gear. In our being encouraged to remember the end, God's good and glorious and all-encompassing end, in our trusting in God's eternal word ever speaking to a creation made and sustained and redeemed by the word, we are free to let God take it from here.

This is the last sermon I'll ever preach here. Next week, Liz Garrigan-Byerly will preach, our conference minister whom the Monterey Church, fifteen years ago, called to discernment and ultimately ordained. She's going to come back and preach to the congregation where for her it began. So, this is it from me, which makes finding this sermon's final word harder than usual. I

have loved here. The eternal word has given me many words to speak here. But human effort can only take things so far. God works the perfect completion. Take my silence as a final faithful word.

Thanks be to God.