

A Sermon preached in St. John's Episcopal Church, Greencastle, Indiana
on the Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, November 17, 2013
by the Rev. William D. Wieland

(Luke 21: 5-19)

“Some things never change.”

All of us have probably heard someone make a statement like that—or maybe even said something like that ourselves—at one time or another.

“Some things never change.”

At least it seems that some things never change.

“Never” is, of course, a relative term which signifies, most likely, “at least not in my lifetime” and is, therefore, a highly subjective term at best.

But think for a moment about all the things that many of us thought were permanent, things we thought would never change, but which have changed radically in just the last twenty or thirty years—things we thought would last for ever that just don't exist anymore.

At the end of the 1980's the United States was waging what we called “the Cold War” with what seemed to be a practically invincible political monolith, Soviet Communism, which dominated all of Eastern Europe and much of Asia.

There was no reason not to believe that the principles of communism, as one political historian phrased it, were “solidly entrenched”, and would be “a major influence in the world for at least a few centuries to come.”

I have been to Berlin several times over the years.

I remember well the grim look of the Berlin Wall, the brutal intrusion of totalitarian communism into the sphere of the free world—a snake of concrete and barbed wire that carved up streets and wound its way

mercilessly through the middle of abandoned buildings, when I was a student in Germany toward the end of the 1960's, and I remember what it looked like thirty years later, when I returned, this time with Lucy and our daughter Lanie, to a no longer divided city deep in the throes of rebuilding itself; there wasn't much of the Wall left standing at all—just a few hundred feet covered with brightly colored murals boldly proclaiming the end of tyranny, preserved as a kind of offhand memorial; now, I understand, even that is gone.

Not that we found everybody necessarily pleased with this historic turn of events; I would be less than honest if I didn't add that the taxi driver who picked us up at the railway station in Alexander Square, a place that a scant eight years before had been completely cut off from western travelers—less than honest if I didn't add that she took me aside to tell me that life had been an awful lot easier for her under communism, when she always had work and a paycheck—something that hadn't been the case recently.

Her confession, I guess you could call it, made me realize that no matter how welcome that which is new may be, every change—even the most salvific of changes—cannot help but mean significant loss for someone.

Of course, if the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall are now history, in more ways than one, it has not taken that long for us to find a new adversary—some would say “for a new adversary to find us”—in Islamic extremist elements that have vowed to destroy what they consider to be our decadent Western culture; whatever fears and apprehensions may have remained at the end of the Cold War have transferred themselves easily to the waging of a global war on terrorism.

And unfortunately, too, for every wall that comes down, another goes up, or so it seems.

The Israelis, of all people, have built a wall that snakes its way through Palestine, of all places, and the need for stronger and more permanent barriers along our southern border invariably hijacks the conversation, every time the topic of immigration policy reform is raised in Washington.

Confronting the truth that there is very little that is permanent in the world can be both encouraging and disturbing.

We may effectively say “Good riddance” with regard to international communism, even as we deplore the political chaos and economic instability which continue to plague what is left of the Soviet empire, but the possibility of change in institutions that we ourselves may have come to hold dear can fill us with alarm; we may feel that we are heading toward certain disaster. Surely that is how the people in today’s Gospel lesson from Luke must have felt when Jesus announced that not one stone of their magnificent temple would be left standing upon another.

The temple in Jerusalem, in one form or another, had stood for hundreds of years.

It seemed that nothing less than the end of the world could turn it into rubble.

Yet, as we know, though it probably did feel like the end of the world, all it took to destroy the temple, the central symbol of Judaism that had lasted for centuries—all it took was the invasion of the Roman army.

Hardly the end of the world.

Just a reminder that almost nothing is permanent.

A reminder that almost everything changes.

No wonder Jesus warned the people not to jump to conclusions! “When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified,” Jesus told them, “for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.”

They were not to assume that political upheaval and natural disasters necessarily foreshadowed the end of all things.

Political upheaval and natural disasters were merely signs that things they might like to think would never change were going to change after all.

Only one thing, Jesus in effect told his listeners, would truly never change: the truth of God’s love.

“...not a hair of your head will perish,” Jesus told them. “By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

Even if everything else threatened to come unstuck, God’s love would remain.

After all, the destruction of the temple however great the loss, would not spell the end of Judaism; Judaism was able to endure—endure quite well, in fact—with no temple.

As one of the world’s major religions Judaism has advanced well beyond the need for anything like the Temple and is probably much better off without one.

Well, we have been able to make unconscionably short shrift of someone else’s temple, but what about the Church?

If these words of Jesus reassure us that what counts, God’s love, will never be taken from us, does it necessarily follow that we will always be able to count on the institution of the Church as we know it for the experience of that love?

I say "...the Church as we now know it" because there is some reason to believe that the Church *in some form* will exist until God has decided that it is no longer needed.

What form the Church will eventually take is another matter entirely.

Think of what major changes have taken place in our own branch of the Church in a relatively short time.

A little more than thirty years ago the Episcopal Church in this country began to ordain women as priests, with our own diocese leading the charge; it took our senior partner, so to speak, in the Anglican Communion another fifteen years to follow suit; now women are ordained to the priesthood in the Church of England, though not yet to the episcopate.

Cate, our bishop, has attended the Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops held in Canterbury twice in her sixteen-year tenure, though, as she would be the first to point out, on neither occasion was she eligible to participate in ordinations or confirmations there the way she has participated in ordinations and confirmations in parts of South America and in Africa; in other words, in England she is still only allowed to function as a priest, not as a bishop.

But that may change; just a few years ago, after years of wrangling, the Church of England meeting in synod (similar to our General Convention) voted by a slim majority to allow women to be ordained bishops, albeit in principle, signaling that the way was now open for serious and fruitful discussion of such a possibility despite the deep divisions that clearly remained.

Last November a measure to approve the ordination of women to the episcopate finally won a majority in the clerical order, but failed to pass by four votes in the lay order.

Then just a month ago the Church in Wales followed the example of the Anglican churches in Scotland and in Ireland and voted to approve the ordination of women bishops.

One could say that the wave of the future is slowly closing in on our ‘mother Church’, and what with the General Synod scheduled to convene tomorrow afternoon in London, a vote this week, should one be taken, just might clear the way for women to be bishops (and for our own Cate to be treated as a bishop) in the Church of England by the year 2015.

Of course, every significant development in the life of the Church has had its doomsayers, who have warned of, if not the end of the world, then at least the probable end of the Church.

Still, it is hard not to see the growing acceptance worldwide of the ordination of women as a sign of a healthy Church.

[Note: On Wednesday, November 20, 2013, the General Synod of the Church of England voted 378 to 8 with 25 abstentions in favor of ordaining women as bishops as early as 2014.]

But changes likely in the offing for the Church are hardly limited to when or where the next woman bishop, not to mention archbishop, will be ordained.

I remember attending not too long ago, along with several colleagues from the Diocese, a weeklong conference called “Start Up, Start Over” near Asheville, North Carolina, that focused on the challenges that the Church, in particular the Episcopal Church, faces now that we have entered, not all that confidently and, I’m afraid, a bit reluctantly, the twenty-first century.

It was mostly all video and Power Point, even a lot of the liturgy; about the only things that week one could call “real”, not virtual, were breakfast, lunch and dinner, and Holy Communion.

The experience reminded me that more than one futurist scholar has predicted that it won't be long before the average congregation, no matter which denomination, will likely be watching a carefully wrought video production on Sunday morning rather than listening to a preacher deliver a sermon.

After all, no longer is the predominant means of transmitting and receiving information in our culture the printed word or even, shall we say, the “unadorned” spoken word, for lack of a better term.

Transmitting and receiving information in our culture is now largely done through multi-sensory, audio-visual experiences generated by television and computers.

Presenter after presenter at the “Start up, Start over” conference characterized the Church as being woefully behind in understanding the power that electronic media already wield in our culture, often mistaking media as tools to assist rather than as a means of direct experience.

The truth of that diagnosis was brought home to me in a real way a couple of summers ago when the bulk of our Sunday worship at Lucy's annual family reunion turned out to be watching a video of a congregation watching a video in an enormous auditorium in Louisville, sort of a light-show about the wonders of God's universe, narrated by a televangelist who obviously knew how to pull out all the stops.

It was hard not to be blown away by the experience of watching the congregation being blown away by the experience of watching the video.

It was powerful, but it wasn't church—at least not for me.

Still, am I as troubled to learn that a projection screen might eventually replace the pulpit in the Church of the future, as troubled as the people of Jerusalem were to hear that their beloved temple would be reduced to rubble—troubled enough to try and stave it off?

No, I think I would just as soon help carry the pulpit out of the church, when the time comes, rather than be carried out with it, though at my age I probably don't need to worry.

Some things never change—except that they do!

However zealously we work to preserve the temples of one kind or another that we build—many of them raised in tribute to our own egos—they all eventually crumble, and we are brought face to face with that which alone endures: God's love.

That is the lesson that our experience teaches—our experience of a Church that is willing to reshape itself to meet the needs of future generations, our experience of a world whose political tides are ultimately unpredictable.

And this is also the lesson that Jesus' rumination on the fate of the Jerusalem temple teaches.

The Church, the world as we know it, everything—it may all come to an end, but God's love will never end.

Thanks be to God!