

“Gain Your Soul”

Who here grew up with View Master? You may remember that they were beige colored plastic devices that looked a bit like binoculars. There was a slot on the top in which you put a disk that had tiny photographic slides. There was a lever on the side. You put the eyepiece up to your face, and you would see three-dimensional images of famous places from around the world. The photos were so sharp, and the 3D effect was so amazing that you felt like you were right there. The disks came in sets such as Paris or London, marine life, wildlife of Africa, Disney characters, and more. It was amazing to see these images and wonder what it would be like to be there. What would it be like to walk the streets of Montmartre or Manhattan, or explore beneath the sea or on the Serengeti? One image that has stuck with me since childhood was seeing the Pyramids of Giza on the slides. They looked tall, but on the slide without something to compare them to they seemed like they might just be the size of a four-story apartment building. Big but not huge.

Fast forward forty years to the end of my first year in seminary. A group of us students, along with alumni and professors, went to Egypt, Jordan, and Israel for a three-week travel seminar. Our first stop was Cairo, and our first site visit was the Great Pyramid. As we approached by bus, the pyramids became visible, and then as the modern buildings became fewer, there arose out of the desert the actual Pyramids. Initially, they looked large, but there was a trick of the eye that they did not look huge. But as we approached, I noticed how the Pyramid was made of fantastically large blocks of stone. They were almost seven feet wide and about five feet tall. When seen on the View Master, their proportions seemed more human-sized.

We also visited the Temple in Jerusalem on that trip. While it is only a remnant of the first-century building, it is still quite impressive. Beneath street level, you can see the huge stones that make up the base. They are even more immense than the stones making up the Pyramids of Giza.

When I hear today’s Gospel lesson from Luke, I can relate to the amazement of the disciples as they visit the Temple in Jerusalem. These guys were a bunch of hicks from Galilee. Galilee had no cities. It had mostly fishing villages and hamlets. The largest town at the time was Sephora. It was a trade crossroads. It was also a city where a rebellion had broken out. The Romans destroyed it, and the city had to be rebuilt.

For the disciples of Jesus, the sight of Herod’s Temple in Jerusalem was overwhelming. Indeed, it was awe-inspiring to city dwellers, much less a bunch of fishermen and craftsmen from out in the boonies. In truth, if you or I were to have visited Herod’s Temple as it was in 30 AD, we would have been amazed, too.

Herod the Great had undertaken many building projects. The most important and massive was the enlargement of the Temple in Jerusalem. The stone platform for Herod’s Temple covered thirty-three acres. The walls that supported the temple platform were nine stories tall (what you see at the Western

Wall is only a portion of the walls because the street level has risen over the twenty-one centuries since Jesus' time). These walls are as much as sixteen feet thick and were comprised of quarried stone "bricks" weighing as much as six hundred tons each, while the heaviest stones of the Great Pyramid are about fifty tons. Herod's Temple was not your neighborhood synagogue.

The Temple was built to inspire awe. Herod wanted people to be amazed and remember him as the one who built it. He also wanted to pacify the religious factions under his rule and keep them from rebelling. He also wanted to appease his benefactors, the Roman Empire. While Solomon's Temple, the first Temple, was about God, Herod's Temple was about Herod and political power.

While the disciples were astounded by what they saw, Jesus was not. He tells them in essence, "So what? This grand place will become rubble." Jesus does not explain how this will happen or why. He simply states that it will. The disciples ask Jesus to give them a prediction for when the Temple will come tumbling down. Instead of offering a date, Jesus gives an eschatological warning of how to know that the Day of the Lord is upon them.

First, he warns them not to be deceived by false prophets and fake messiahs. He also prepares them for being arrested on account of their belief in Jesus.

Across the millennia, each fearful event, such as an earthquake, famine, pestilence, or omen in the heavens, has sent someone into a tizzy. And they act like a husband in a 60s sitcom who, at the first sign of his wife going into labor, runs around the house collecting all of the essential items, jumps into the car, and speeds away to the hospital, only to remember that he has forgotten the one who is most important—his wife.

We, too, forget what is crucial, and it is not the portents in the heavens. Rather, it is how we respond as disciples of Jesus. He says the disasters "will give you an opportunity to testify." He also tells us not to worry about our testimony because he will give them the words when the time comes. Likewise, Jesus will be with contemporary disciples when we are brought before our accusers. What we say will not need to be planned, for the Spirit will speak through us as the Spirit has spoken through the prophets before us. If we stand firm during these trials, we "will gain [their] souls."

When we trust in God, we are secure. Despite the changes and chances of life, it is with our faith in God that we gain our souls. That is what Franciscan Friar Richard Rohr calls the true self that God called into being when each of us was born. It is in that alone that we can discover our true self. Thereby keeping what the powers and principalities of this world try to steal from us. This self is the person that the world needs. For we, like Esther, may well have been born for such a time as this.