

“Soul Work”

I grew up in a small town in Virginia and I can still remember the first time I visited a really big city. It was the summer between fifth and sixth grade. I spent several weeks that summer traveling the eastern seaboard with my father. We visited tree farms and nurseries hunting for plant stock for the family business. One of the trips took us up to Long Island. The highlight of that trip, beyond all that one-on-one time with my dad, was our visit to New York City.

We drove into the City on a Sunday morning. The first thing that struck me was how wide the streets were and yet there was no traffic. As I gazed out of the window at the tall buildings and empty streets I asked my dad, “Where is everyone? Why are the streets empty? Shouldn’t they be going to church now?” I was a little naïve then. But my wonder at the empty streets was soon overtaken by my wonder at the height of the buildings. The apartment buildings seemed like skyscrapers until I saw that the commercial buildings were taller still. I think I got a crick in my neck that morning from spending so much time peering upward.

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 bumpkins from Galilee. The sight of the Temple was overwhelming to city dwellers much less a bunch of fisherman and shepherds from out in the boonies. In truth, if you or I were to visit Herod’s Temple around 30 AD we would have been amazed, too. Herod the Great had undertaken a massive project to enlarge 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, as much as sixteen feet thick, and were comprised of quarried stone “bricks” weighing as much as 600 tons each. This 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 pacify the religious factions under his rule and keep them from rebelling, and, in turn, appease his benefactors, the Roman Empire. While Solomon’s Temple, the first Temple, was about God, Herod’s Temple was about Herod.

The disciples were astounded by what they saw, but not Jesus. He tells them in essence, “So what? This grand place will become rubble.” Jesus doesn’t explain how this will happen or why. He simply states that it will. The disciples want to know when they can expect the Temple to come tumbling down.

As is Jesus’ way he does not answer their question directly. Instead, he warns them not to be led astray. He tells they will hear about wars and rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, and nations rising against nations. Since that day some Christians have been trying figure out just exactly which disasters and wars are the omens. Every age has its moments of crisis, war, and natural

disasters. Throughout the centuries each new crisis sends 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 only to remember that he has forgotten what is most important—his wife.

We too forget what is crucial and it is not the portents. 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 us the words when the time comes. When we are brought before our accusers he will be with us. What we say will not need to be planned for the Spirit will speak through us as the Spirit has spoken to the prophets before us. For enduring these trials we “will gain your souls.”

The disciples were awestruck by the grand structure of the Temple. While the Temple was a marvel, Jesus made it clear that it was impermanent. What is essential and enduring is our relationship with God. God’s marvelousness is not in a structure built by human hands, but in the profoundly deep, unquenchable love and endless forgiveness offered to us through God’s grace. Our souls are not kept safe by great buildings and other human made edifices like buildings, empires, or wealth. Neither are they saved by celebrity, political power, or armies. God’s love unlike the Temple will not tumble down. When we trust in God we are secure. It is with our enduring faith in God, despite the tribulations of this life, that we gain our souls. It is in that alone that we can discover the true self. Thereby winning back for ourselves what the powers and principalities of this world try to steal from us—the one true you who God called into being.