

The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost – November 17, 2019
Luke 21:5-19

Almighty God, we ask that you grant us in this world knowledge of your truth, and in the next, life everlasting. Amen.

When my family and I lived in Texas, we would attend the annual Day of the Dead festival at a local Austin outdoor venue. Known as *Día de los Muertos*, it is a multi-day Mexican holiday in which friends and family gather to remember loved ones who have passed away. This holiday is not viewed as a time of sadness but as celebration in an explosion of color and life-affirming joy because their loved ones awake and celebrate with them.

The Day of the Dead customs originated several thousand years ago with the Aztec and Toltec people of Mexico, but today's *Día de los Muertos* celebration is a mash-up of pre-Hispanic religious rites and Christian feasts. It takes place on November 1 and 2 – All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day on the liturgical calendar – around the time of the fall maize harvest.

This is a holiday that reunites the living and dead. Families create *ofrendas* to honor their departed family members that have passed. These altars are decorated with bright yellow and orange marigold flowers, photos of the departed, sugar skulls, and the favorite foods and drinks of the one being honored. The offerings are believed to encourage visits from the land of the dead as the departed souls hear their prayers, smell their foods and join in the celebrations. More recent customs include parades and festivals where participants sing and dance while dressed in costumes and wearing skull face paint.

The *Día de los Muertos* festival that my family liked to attend included over one hundred drummers and samba dancers. The dancers were dressed in outfits of black or white, accented with purple, red, orange, and yellow. Most of the performers had their faces painted to resemble decorated skulls or were wearing skull masks, and there were dancing puppeteers wearing 15-foot tall skeleton costumes. The puppets included a skeleton bride and groom, and a skeleton Conquistador.

The show was exhilarating. The musicians moved in unison while they played layer upon layer of percussive rhythms on snare drums, hand drums, and various bells. The dancers were joyful and exuberant, even as they wore death upon their dancing bodies. The impossibly tall skeleton puppets danced with the music and weaved in and out through the dancers.

The music was so infectious, most of us in the audience could not help ourselves but to join in the dance. Being swept away by the rhythms with all the other dancing bodies and skeletons, I realized what I was experiencing. We were in the midst of a joyous and courageous proclamation of life in the face of death. This spectacle of dance, music, paint, and skeletons was recognition that life does inevitably lead to death, but that death is not the final answer. Confronted with death and destruction, we defiantly shouted our hope of life that persists, and maybe even grows out from the trappings of death. This was another expression of our Easter hope; that from death, we celebrate resurrection of new life.

For over half of Luke's gospel so far, Jesus has "set his face to Jerusalem" and has been relentless in his journey toward his inevitable fate. When Jesus finally enters Jerusalem, he heads directly to the Temple: the center of Jewish life, the bastion of God's divine favor, the impressive and seemingly indomitable fortress of the seat of God.

From this point forward, until Passover and the Last Supper, Jesus is preaching and teaching in the Temple. While there, Jesus is challenged and attacked, as the Pharisees, Sadducees, and other leaders of the religious elite, attempt to trick Jesus into incriminating himself so they may get rid of

this trouble-maker. Jesus dances with them but always remains a couple of steps ahead. And as the dance continues, more and more people come to hear this rebellious rabbi and prophet who speaks truth too dangerous and inflammatory to utter aloud.

One day, some of those who were gathered around Jesus looked around the temple and admired its great size and beauty. Jesus listened to them and then responded, "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." He then proceeds to talk about signs of the end-times, and foretell the persecution of the disciples.

I have to say that I have difficulty making much sense of these so-called "end-times" predictions. And it seems that just about every other month, some religious leader is fervently claiming that some political or ecological disaster marks the approaching of the end-times. And yet, every time, life in this world persists beyond this event or that tragedy.

I think I may I know a little bit about what it means when temples fall, when something that seems so central, so necessary and fixed in my life, becomes rubble. In fact, I suspect that just about everyone does, to some degree. It seems that in our lives now when we so keenly feel the world rapidly changing around us, we have all experienced a taste of this.

For instance, when I go back to my childhood hometown, it has changed so much that it seems that I no longer recognize it. Neighborhoods of new large houses exist in the fields and woods in which I played and grew up. Narrow and bumpy two-lane roads have been replaced by smooth and busy four-lane streets, finished with sidewalks and streetlights. I'm not even sure I could find my childhood neighborhood any longer without a map. What seemed like immutable and permanent parts of my childhood have long become rubble and have been replaced with something new.

Are these Temples? No, of course not. At least not in the way Jesus speaks. But they are places that once seemed fixed and central to our understanding of place and self. And while it feels like so much that was recognizable and familiar has been destroyed, in its place is new life.

This sense of destruction of the familiar and essential – the temple that lies at the center of the life we recognize and the person we know ourselves to be – can also be deeply existential, in addition to material. Who among us has not sensed and mourned the loss and destruction of some core essence of our identity, and yet, after a while, found a new identity beginning to form? Who has not lost something so essential, something that seemed crucial to our very life and happiness, to later find that that loss made room for something new and unexpected to take root?

For the Israelites, the Temple lay at the center of their identity. It was in the Temple that the very earthly presence of God resided. In Jesus' time, all of the important religious rituals happened in the Temple in Jerusalem, and it was expected that all Jews make the pilgrimage to it at certain points in their lives. The Temple represented a material, concrete manifestation of God and God's favor upon His chosen people and it was also where one went to experience God. For the Temple to be destroyed, it begged serious existential questions: who are we then, without the temple? Since the seat of God resides there, does its destruction mean that God is no longer with us? How do we continue as God's chosen people without it?

But Jesus brings a new vision for relationship with God. This relationship is not contained within beautiful stonework of the Temple, but within the resurrected Christ's very own body. Through participation in the Body of Christ, we may be adopted into the divine relationship that the Son enjoys with the Father. But to move to this new center of life seems to require destruction of the old.

In our world, we primarily experience life that leads to death, creation that decays to destruction, one body that fractures into many. But Jesus teaches and promises us what seems like the impossible: of death that leads to life, of destruction that makes way for new creation, of many bodies that, in him, become one new body.

And yet, if we observe life within God's creation, we can see tendrils of this promise already alive in the world. A devastating forest fire that clears out the undergrowth and provides rich fertilizer for new life and a renewed forest. The cycle of summer's growth, fall's decay, and winter's fallow barrenness that are necessary for the bursting forth of new life experienced in spring. The seed that must die in order to free its potential for life. Sometimes expressions of life have to end to make room for new and renewed life to flourish.

One of the most compelling metaphors of God for me is the Lord of the Dance – Christ as the Lord of life who dances through all creation, calling us to new and eternal life in him. I think we may best reveal his image imprinted within us when we join Him in the dance, wearing our mortality on our faces and defiantly shouting life in the face of death, resurrection in the face of the great void, and new creation in the face of destruction.

Amen.