

**Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL**

**November 17, 2013**

**Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell**

**Text --Luke 21: 9-15**

I don't imagine Dave Mikelson was meditating on today's Gospel passage when he wrote his article for the e-Blast this week. "Wow! What a nice wall!" he wrote. Maybe he was also thinking about its heft, its strength and stability, and how it would stand for many years. How it would not disrupt our ecumenical relationships by raining rocks onto the Presbyterian pastor's lawn and cars.

"When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God..." This is what Jesus' followers were saying in Jerusalem during those very last days before he was arrested and put to death.

There are similarities: huge stones hewn from area limestone, stacked with precision into attractive and sturdy walls expected to last through the ages. To support the structures where our faith communities are centered.

The second temple in Jerusalem was thought to be the most magnificent structure ever built. It was the replacement for the 1st Temple, Solomon's Temple that was destroyed and desecrated by the Assyrians and Babylonians. Last week we talked about the prophet Haggai, who encouraged its rebuilding in order to reunite and reinvigorate a people who had been divided by years of exile. So, it was rebuilt, becoming the very center of Jewish religious life once again--the place the people came for their feasts and festivals. And later, Herod the Great made it into the even more splendid place that it was becoming during Jesus' life and ministry.

But instead of joining in their admiration, Jesus dropped a bombshell: "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.” Unimaginable.

I have had a front row seat to the dismantling and reconstruction of our limestone wall. It has been an engineering feat--the noise of jackhammers, the heavy equipment taking away the old stones, leveling the ground, and bringing in the larger stones, putting them in their proper place for maximum stability. And this is just a simple wall, straight, not too high. Nothing at all like that Temple that was built without the machines--just with animals and people power. Still, both are meant to last for a very long time. It is hard to imagine a wall falling down, let alone an entire Temple.

The Temple reconstruction began in the time of Haggai--520 BCE. Herod the Great began the renovation and enlargement in 500 years later in 19 BCE. It was still under construction during Jesus' time, taking 83 years before its completion in 64 CE. And then, just 6 years later, it was destroyed by the Romans.

And that destruction was the end of the world as the Jewish community knew it. The Jews were driven out of Jerusalem, the followers of Jesus were persecuted and martyred. There was not some kind of magical pass that freed them from hardship because they were faithful.

In the other Gospels Jesus is a bit more clear. He says that though the stones of the temple will be thrown down, He, the true Temple, will return in three days. The trials are not the end of the story. Those who could endure would be fine. They would save their souls.

In Luke's time, the war and destruction had already happened. He was writing for people who were already living in its aftermath, experiencing the trials and loss, the persecution, trying to live into this new promise Jesus had given them. And they did, testifying to Christ's resurrection and continued presence with them, carrying the Good News into the world, building the body of Christ, the church.

Jesus' message, the promise that Luke passed on in his generation was not meant just for those first century emerging Christians. It was meant for all of us through the centuries who face the trials of remaining faithful. It reminds us of what is most important. Buildings meant to last forever fall from the winds and the water of tornados and typhoons, the shaking of earthquakes, erosion, or terrorism and wars. Institutions come and go. Relationships ebb and flow. We watch disasters taking place around us and become discouraged wondering just when God's reign will be fulfilled. These words remind us that we are to endure.

Not exactly the message we would prefer. It sounds so grim. As if our lives of faith were no more than trouble and hardship. As if we are meant to suffer and toil until this life comes to an end and we enjoy the "pie in the sky when we die."

I don't believe that for a minute! I believe that though God's reign has not yet been fulfilled, it is here among us. Yes, we have sorrows and struggles. But we have joys, too. And our task is to learn what is lasting, enduring and cling to that. It is to strive to follow Jesus in building relationships and communities that are just and loving and welcoming of all. It is about using the resources we have to that end.

Our churches wrestle with just how to do that. It is often not easy, and we sometimes disagree. Do we shore up crumbling buildings or do we give more to the Food Pantry, to typhoon relief, to those who suffer in Africa and Southeast Mexico? What is the right formula for caring for ourselves or others? Do we save or spend? How do we best steward what we have? These are the kinds of choices we must make. And, hopefully, we make them through prayer.

I, for one, believe in enduring, remaining in the struggle, difficult though it may be. For there is nothing that brings me greater joy than trying to do my small part in bringing about the realm of God. That's why I intend to continue supporting the church, its ministry and mission. For all of us together can do so much more -- those of us here at Grace, the congregations in the United Churches of Galena, our diocese, all of the

churches in our country, in our world. Just imagine what kind of world it could be if we all truly followed that One who so dramatically--and showed--told his followers what was most important, what would crumble and fall and what would endure.

That's why I have checked my finances. That's why I have prayed and pondered. That's why I have listened with delight to the stories told here in worship these past weeks about the important role Grace plays in peoples' lives. I have watched all of the caring that goes on here as we care for each other and the generosity with which we respond to the needs of the world beyond our doors. I want this to continue. I want this to endure and to grow. And I want to be a part of it. I hope you do, too.