
With All our Heart, All our Hope, and All our Hair

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
The Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 28, Year C

Boy, do I love a good Bible verse promising me that I'm not going to lose any more hair! Yes! Woohoo! My guess is I'm not alone in this reaction. For those of us who watch with chagrin each morning as our once luxuriant locks circle the drain in clumps that could choke a hippopotamus; for those of us who have ever tried to use a tube of mascara or a magic marker to cover up a bald spot—for folks like us, today's reading from the Gospel of Luke comes as great Good News! *Not a hair on your head will perish*, Jesus promises. Not a hair on your head will perish. I feel like I could probably just end this sermon right now, and a whole bunch of us would go home happy.

But, of course, I'm not going to do that. Hair is not what I'm here to talk about today. But Good News is! Good News is. Now, I know: At first glance, this morning's gospel lesson doesn't seem like it contains much in the way of Good News. Wars and insurrections, earthquakes, famines, plagues, dreadful portents, arrests, betrayals, death. And it's no wonder. It's no wonder all this stuff is in here. You see, the original audience Luke is addressing in this reading has seen the destruction of pretty much everything they hold dear. The Temple, the place where God dwells, has been reduced to dust. The Roman Empire is cheating, detaining, arresting, beating, starving, and killing people. It's a cruel, vicious world in which Jesus' first followers are living. How are they to go on?

The parallels with our own time are hard to miss. Don't get me wrong: Our magnificent cathedral is standing tall and sturdy, thanks be to God, and the Good Faith Chapel draws nearer to completion each day. Many of our lives go on as usual: Children head off to school and soccer practice; parents head off to work; plans for Thanksgiving are made. We take delight in the beauty of the changing seasons. We celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, and great victories by the Georgia Bulldogs. Nonetheless, all around us, it's clear that things are crumbling. How are we to live in such a time?

For the disciples in this morning's gospel, the answer to this question is, *We panic*. We panic, and we start asking a whole lot more questions: When is the really terrible awful stuff going to take place? How will we know the signs? Should we start tearing our hair out now? *No*, says Jesus, *I'm got good news about your hair in my next paragraph, so just hold on*.

Okay, that was a joke. That was a joke. But seriously, did you notice what Jesus does when the disciples start asking all their questions, when they start having their apostolic freak out? Instead of matching their anxiety, he invites them to consider another possibility. Jesus invites his followers to consider another way of living through scary times. *These horrors*, he says—*these horrors will give you an opportunity to testify*. They will give you an opportunity to testify.

In other words: There might just be a strange gift here in the midst of all the pain and confusion. Don't get me wrong. Jesus is not saying that all the terrible things that are happening are somehow all right. He's not saying that people should just lie down and take them. What he is saying, though, is that the trials of this present time offer his followers, both then and now—the trials of this present time offer us the chance to rely on our faith and then to share that faith with others. Remember that no matter how awful things get, God is good. God is good, and God is faithful. So we need not be afraid. Our temples may lie in ruins, but God is still here. He's just busted out of the little boxes we humans like to try to put him in. God's broken free! God's on the loose! Which means God is free to act in ways far greater than we could ever ask or imagine. God can even act right in the midst of the rubble; in fact, the ruins of life are where God invariably seems to do God's best work.

Which is precisely what a bunch of you have been testifying to lately. I know, because I've seen you. When you thought nobody was looking, I've caught you in the act. Yes, you—Episcopalians! I've caught you testifying. You've heard of that old show "Candid Camera," but I've caught you on "Canon Camera"! I've caught you convincing your colleagues that instead of doing a White Elephant for the office Christmas party this year, you might collect grocery cards for a local food bank. I've caught you heading to your customary seat in the nave on Sunday only to change your mind at the last minute and go plant yourself beside someone whose loved one just died. I've caught you racing across the street late on a Friday afternoon to deliver 60 quarts of hot, fresh, nutritious soup to our neighbors at Parish Grove. I've caught you racing—and I've caught you hobbling, too—to bring a word of encouragement to someone you could tell really needed it.

You know, you, we, the Body of Christ—all of us together—are a whole lot more powerful than you may think. You, we, are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever. Forever! So that even when the temple falls or the economy crashes or the food stamps people need to eat get cut off and the bombs keep flying all over the world in the middle of the night—even when all these things happen, Jesus reminds us, *Don't give up, and don't give in*. In the words of the apostle Paul to the Phillipians: "Keep on doing the things you have learned and received and seen and heard in me, and the God of peace will be with you." Or, as the last line of this morning's gospel reading puts it, "By your endurance, you will gain our souls."

Alan Jones, retired Dean of Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, writes of two young parents whose child suffered from leukemia back in the days when that was still an extremely hard disease to treat. Jones had talked with this couple about the family's ordeal and listened as they described how they had gotten through it. It was, they reflected, unquestionably the hardest, most desperate time of their lives, and yet there was a certain wonder to it as well. There was a certain wonder, and, yes, weird though it sounds, even a certain joy—not happiness, but joy—to those days. The couple tried to explain to Jones how the experience had ultimately changed them in a way that had somehow made them more whole. *Here's the thing*, they said. *Here's the things about that time. We were asking all kinds of questions: Why? How? When? Where? With what? We were asking all kinds of questions . . . but we were asking them with all our heart.* We were asking all kinds of questions, but we were asking them with all our heart. In other words, they were all in. Those parents were all in. They were in touch with love. They were in touch with faith and fear and doubt, with hope and anguish and grace and mercy and all the other mysteries that lie right at the heart of what it means to be human. They knew that each day mattered, that it was a gift. And so they persevered, Jones says—they persevered until, by their endurance, they gained their souls.

Friends, this is the opportunity you and I have right now as followers of Jesus. In this time of fear and uncertainty for so many, in this time of both cruelty and kindness, when we have questions—*What is ours to do? Who are we to be? How can we possibly help?*—when we have questions, now is the time to ask them with all our heart. When we possess even a smidgen of grace and love to share, now is the time to take the opportunity to testify—to give, in word or in deed, an account of the hope that is in us. To endure and to gain our souls. So that not a hair on our head will perish. Amen.