Sunday, November 19, 1995
TUMBLING TEMPLES
Luke 21:5-19

As most of us were growing up and reading children's stories, many of them ended with the phrase: "And they lived happily ever after." The implication of this phrase is that the lives of the individuals in the story will go on forever without ending, with little or no change. As we grow and mature, we discover that all stories have endings — some happy and some tragic.

There are passages in the Bible that insist the story of creation itself will arrive at an ending. One Biblical commentator put it this way, "The whole great dance of things will come to a stop. Histories will terminate. The lights will go out. The whole show will close down. The door will slam shut. God may open another door after that closing, a door to another room for another dance, but the only dance we know about is heading for an end."

Predictions of when this end will take place come and go. As we approach the year 2000, the end of a millennium and the beginning of a new one, you can be sure that such predictions will abound.

In November of 1992, I remember seeing a sign while driving along a major highway that said, "The world is coming to an end on October 28, 1992." Someone should've taken the sign down after that date had passed, but those who put it up expected the end of the world to do that.

Back in 1970, a book by Hal Lindsey, The Late Great Planet Earth, was published and, over time, sold over 4,000,000 copies. In this book, Mr. Lindsey claimed that through his study of the Scriptures, the end of the world was imminent. He didn't set a date but implied it was coming very soon.

In this country, the biggest surge in the belief that the end of the world was near occurred in the early 1800s. The individual at the center of the movement was a man named William Miller. He was born in Massachusetts in 1782 but grew up in upstate New York. His formal schooling consisted of the rudimentary education that the three-month wilderness schools offered at that time. Despite educational handicaps, Miller learned to read well and became a self-educated man.

After a conversion experience, Miller began a reverent study of the Bible and became convinced that Christ would return soon and bring an end to the world as we know it. Using all kinds of complicated mathematical formulas, he calculated that this would happen in 1843 or 1844. Eventually, the exact date of October 22, 1844, was selected.

Despite the fact that before Miller's prediction, and many times since then, many dates have been selected for the end of the world and none have come true, new predictions continue to be made, and each one gathers a certain number of followers.

What is it that draws people to follow a religious leader who predicts that the world is coming to an end soon? Perhaps it's comforting for them to believe they are part of an exclusive group that has special knowledge and that they, therefore, will inherit paradise while others will not. Or maybe they figure that almost any life in another world will be better than this one. It provides a quick and simple solution to whatever problems one is facing.

We do know that many of the followers of Jesus in the first century confidently expected his return in some kind of physical way, and many of them tied this to the world coming to an end.

It is also clear that in some of the gospel accounts, Jesus talked about his return and implied that one day the world as we know it will end, or at least those who heard Jesus remembered and interpreted what he said in that way.

The writers of the gospels were also influenced by Jewish ideas from the Old Testament. Many who were part of the Hebrew tradition in Jesus' time and before believed that their present age was wicked and deformed by suffering — so much so that one day God would bring a new age of peace, joy, and love.

The idea was as old as some of the prophets. Listen to Malachi: "See the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and evildoers will be stubble... but for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings" (Malachi 4:2).

The early Christians adapted this hope, especially during times of persecution. Then it was especially comforting to believe that God's victory would take place over their enemies by means of the return of Jesus with glory and power.

Today, if we want to begin to understand what the New Testament writers had to say about the end of the world, we need to put it into the context and worldview of that day.

The understanding of creation at that time was that we lived in a small, three-story universe — God and the angels in heaven above, a flat earth with people and other creatures, and nothingness below. Thus, the Savior is depicted as returning on the clouds of heaven with power and glory.

The fact that the writers of the Bible did their thinking and writing in the context of the worldview of their time is natural, so we have to go beyond that worldview and look for the inner truth of what they were saying.

What then are some of the inner truths that these stories about the end of time contain? The passage we read this morning from Luke's gospel is especially instructive.

In Luke 21, Jesus is standing near the entrance of the temple in Jerusalem, and his words give us plenty to think about. The remarks of Jesus are sparked by someone's comment about the beauty of the temple. People in that day were much impressed by the temple in Jerusalem, and it's understandable. Many thought of it as the gate to heaven itself. Nothing ever built was or would ever be in the future as marvelous. It would last forever.

Their thoughts were similar to what many of us think about this beautiful church building. Every morning when I come to work here, I am struck by its architectural design and its overall beauty, and I like to think it will be here this way forever. We feel the same way not only about religious buildings but other impressive structures as well. I always admire our state capitol building here in Lincoln. Every time I go to Washington, D.C., I am moved by many of our government buildings. And when my wife and I have traveled in other countries, the beauty of the cathedrals inspires us. Each time I have been in St. Peter's in Rome, I have been overwhelmed by it. A few years back, when we had the opportunity to visit some of the ancient Egyptian temples, we marveled at their intricate designs, their construction, and their durability.

Yet I had to remember that now they were only monuments to a dead past instead of living institutions in the present.

So I can understand the feelings and comments of the people of Israel as they admired the temple in Jerusalem. It was the symbol of their deepest religious traditions from the past, and it contained their hopes for the future.

Therefore, I can also understand the shock of the people who had made the comments when Jesus said — and now I'm paraphrasing—"The day will come when this temple will no longer exist. There won't be a stone left standing on a stone; all will come tumbling down. Where you stand in awe today will one day be ruins."

Jesus didn't have to be clairvoyant to make this prediction. He was reminding them and us that every humanly designed and constructed temple or institution eventually comes tumbling down. Every structure and system for housing the holy will wear out its use, will disappoint, and die. As St. Paul wrote, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels." But so often, we confuse the vessel with the treasure.

Listen to this Biblical commentator: "Name any temple you like, any ground that is sacred to us because at one time or another God met us there: a church, denomination, neighborhood, family, friendship, vocation, passion, memory, or dream — they all have a lifespan, and they all come to an end. They may die of natural causes, ceasing to exist as we who inhabit them die or move on. Or they may die by the violent assault of predatorial forces that are hateful to what we have experienced as holy. But most often, our temples fall because we neglect them until they rot, or because we weigh them down with impossible idolatrous additions."

For example, I've known marriages that have become temples and then have tumbled and died because one or both partners have expected the marriage to be God, to solve all their problems. They have weighed the marriage down with impossible and idolatrous expectations.

In the Old Testament tradition, the first temple was a tent, and it was movable and flexible. But sooner or later, we try, as did the people then, to manage the mystery, and we make what was flexible too rigid, draw tight boundaries, adopt too many rules and regulations, and one day, it tumbles from rigidity and overweight.

Consider as examples some of the tumbling temples in our lifetime. The temple of communism has collapsed. It's a warning to us that the same could happen to capitalism if we try to make it a god or equate it with God. The same could happen with technology. Church denominations are tumbling because of their rigidity and inability to change. Some church congregations are dying for the same reason. The same is true in the business world.

However, it's not all bad news. It's also good news. When Jesus said that the temple would one day tumble, he was also saying that this did not mean that God's power had failed or come to an end, or that God no longer cared for the creation and its people. Do not confuse the vessel with the treasure.

Jesus was saying to the people then, and he is saying to us now, "Do not put your faith in the wrong things. All these things will pass away, but there are some things that will not pass away." God's love and care are forever.

The world may not come to an end in one climactic moment, but in a deeper sense, the world around us, our little worlds as we know them, are always coming to an end. One of the most surprising statistics I've come across recently is that "Ninety-nine percent of all the species that have lived on earth have died away."

Furthermore, although many endings in our world are worth our mourning, at the same time, there's good news because it is possible to see endings as occasions for new beginnings and new faith. When our temples tumble, fresh forms of faith can rise from the ruins. This is especially true for those of us who have the courage to leave the ruins of old systems and bear new faith.

In the summer of 1994, when our church choir sang in the Coventry Cathedral in Coventry, England, we experienced this. Coventry Cathedral was laid in ruins by German firebombs in the Second World War. A stunning new structure rose from the ruins, a global witness to peace and resurrection, and the remains of the old Cathedral were wisely left standing as a reminder of what can happen. Engraved on the floor near the entrance are these words, "To the Glory of God, this cathedral burnt." And just outside, carved on the old burnt-out walls, a promise: "The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former."

This business of endings and new beginnings touches all of our lives. The breaking and losing of relationships alters us. When your children, if you have them, grow up and go away, the relationship is different, and it can never be the same again. Why does the mother or father of the bride or groom cry? For happiness? Hopefully, yes! But for sorrow too. An end has come, and with it, a new beginning.

When parents slip toward senility, and children must assume the role of parents to their parents, no one should be shocked by feelings of sudden and tremendous sorrow. The little worlds in which we live are always coming to an end. Every present accomplishment, although very important at the time, is also perpetually perishing.

Lest we misunderstand, Jesus is not saying that because all things go away, we should not plan and dream and work for the betterment of things. It is to say, however, that the whole and final justification for our lives and for the whole created order is never to be found within that order itself but in the never-ending life and love of God, who is always creating new beginnings out of endings.

This means further that we are not to be primarily concerned with dates and timetables and predictions. Rather, we are to be concerned that we are cooperating with God on the side of the good and living each day to its fullest. Then God's timetables take over.

Not very many years ago, Desmond Tutu, Archbishop of the Anglican Church in South Africa, was speaking out against the temple of racism in his country. This temple had tanks and warplanes, an army to do its bidding, and a tradition of hatred that had co-opted much of religion.

Yet this courageous man of faith declared that he had heard from three nuns who rose each morning before the light of day in Redwoods, California, to pray for justice to be done in South Africa. Therefore, he announced, it was only a matter of time that this racist government would be toppled by the power of God. And so it happened! The apartheid South African government was overmatched.

Out of the ruins of the tumbling temples of our world and of our lives can rise new beginnings. Thanks be to God. Amen.