Sunday, November 18, 2001
LIFE WILL NEVER BE THE SAME AGAIN
Luke 21:5-19

Most of you will remember the ending to many of the stories that your parents and others read to you when you were a young child: “And they lived happily ever after.” The implication of this phrase is that the lives of the characters in the story went on forever, with little or no change, and with nothing bad happening to them ever again. As you grow and mature, you discover that all stories have endings, especially the true stories of our lives. Some end happily, and others tragically. You learn that life is frequently difficult and often complex.

In the days and weeks following the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington D.C., many commentators and others said, “Life in the United States will never be the same again.” Of course, they were correct. Life will never be the same again. It never is. Change is inevitable. Life will never be the same again even if the terrorist attacks had not taken place.

Others said, “I’m looking forward to the day when life returns to normal.” But what is normal? What people usually mean by life returning to normal is a life free of surprises, free of suffering, serious injury, illness, or trouble; a life free of major disruptions. “And they lived happily ever after.”

But life is not like that. If you’ve done much visiting in hospitals, you are aware of the shock that often accompanies serious injury or illness. Someone who always thought of himself as self-sufficient now discovers he cannot walk to the bathroom unassisted. The simplest mechanics of staying alive require heroic effort.

If you have been a patient yourself, you discover anew what is important and what is not important. You even resolve that if you overcome your illness, things are going to be different. Friends and family members show up with flowers, cards, and balloons. You wonder why it took this crisis for you to remember how much you care about them. Buying new furniture for the family room can wait. God can’t. Your job is important, but staying alive is more important.

Then you begin to get better, and as you do, your old life begins to return. You do not forget your resolutions, but they are not as urgent anymore. Besides, remembering them too much only reminds you how scared you were. So you decide it’s better to get your life back to as normal as possible. Your desire is understandable. However, hopefully you won’t return completely to the “normal” you were before — when you had forgotten how important your family and friends were, and when your faith in God was on the back burner.

On the other hand, returning to what you might define as normal can be good. It is good to recover from an illness or tragedy. It is good to forgive someone and to be forgiven. It is good to be healthy and to have energy again. It is good to recover from an attack by terrorists and for life to go on free from as much fear as possible. If that’s your definition of normal, it’s good to return to normal as much as you can, even though normal is always changing.

For example, I remember, as do many of you, a time not too many years ago when I could board an airplane without going through any kind of security device and without having to show any form of personal identification. All I needed was a valid boarding pass. That was considered normal. Do any of you believe that time will ever return again? I wish we could return to that kind of normal. Until September 11, normal was passing through a minimum

security check, but now that's changed dramatically. Our definition of normal is always evolving.

There are some ways I hope we don't return to normal since September 11, or return to normal once we have come through one or more personal crises. Since September 11, people have been more polite and understanding. I'm told that "road rage" is on the decline. Neighbors have visited with each other. People have realized how important their families and other friendships are. Hollywood producers have withheld showing some violent movies. I've seen people wanting to learn more about the true values of religions different from their own. Individuals have been making decisions about what is important in their lives and what is not. So every time I hear someone urging us to return to normal, I hope that in some ways we don't. I want people to keep up the conversations they started while they were waiting in line to give blood. Every time I hear someone say, "Life will never be the same again," I want to reply, "In some ways, that's good."

All of this relates to what Jesus was talking about in the scripture reading from the gospel of Luke. Here's the context of what he was saying. He was standing near the entrance of the temple in Jerusalem. He heard people talking about the beauty and the indestructibility of the temple. Many thought of it as the gate to heaven itself. As far as they were concerned, nothing that marvelous had ever been built before. They believed 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 want to believe that it will be here this way forever. I feel the same way about many other beautiful buildings, not only in this country but around the world. So I can understand the feeling and comments of the people in Jerusalem as they admired the temple. It was the symbol of their deepest religious traditions from the past, and it symbolized their hopes for the future.

I can also understand the shock of the people who were admiring the temple when Jesus said, and now I'm paraphrasing, "The day will come when this temple will no longer exist. There won't be one stone left standing on another. All will come tumbling down. What you admire with reverence today will one day be in 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 or system for symbolizing the holy will come to an end, but that does not mean that the "Holy" or the "Sacred" in life has disappeared. St. Paul wrote: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels." So often we confuse the vessel with the treasure. Sometimes we forget that if the vessel is destroyed, the treasure remains. That was the problem with the people who were shocked by the words of Jesus. They were confusing the temple with God, rather than seeing it as a symbol for God.

My wife and I have been privileged to travel in many parts of the world to visit the ruins of ancient civilizations. We have seen the ruins of many temples in Egypt. We have been to Jerusalem and have stood on the level ground where that temple once was. The temple is gone, but faith in God remains. When a symbol for God is no more, that does not mean that God is no more.

The World Trade Center twin towers are gone, but our faith in a free, democratic way of life remains. In the same way that you cannot destroy God by destroying symbols for God, you cannot destroy freedom by destroying symbols for freedom. That's what Jesus was saying.

These words of Jesus in Luke's gospel apply to our everyday lives in another way. The fact that the beautiful buildings and other symbols we design and build will one day come to an end does not mean we are to neglect them and not care for them in the present. That applies not only to the physical structures we build but also to the institutions that bring order, beauty, and improvements to our daily lives. For example, I've known marriages that have failed because of the neglect of one or both partners. I've known educational institutions that have deteriorated because of neglect and lack of support. I've known church congregations that have dwindled and finally died because of the lack of care and support of the members and a lack of leadership in the clergy.

We are to continue to care for the buildings and institutions that bring beauty, order, and in general make life better, while all the time realizing that life will never be the same again — even though we know that in the long run, many of these same buildings and institutions will go away. We do not know when this might happen. We only know that life in God's creation continues to change and evolve.

There's one more very important point Jesus was making when he said that sometime in the future the temple in Jerusalem would no longer exist. He was reminding the people of his time — and reminding us — not to put our 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.

Personally, I do not believe that the world and creation as we know it will 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 amazing statistics, which I have quoted before, is this: "Ninety-nine percent of all the species that have lived on earth have died away. They are extinct."

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 some endings as occasions for new beginnings and new faith. When our temples tumble, fresh forms of faith can rise from the ruins.

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. 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 burned." 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 changes us. When your children, if you have them, grow up and move 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 at a wedding? For happiness? Hopefully, yes! But for sorrow too. An end has come, and with it a new beginning. Life will never be the same again.

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 you misunderstand, Jesus is not saying that because all things go away you should not plan and dream and work for the betterment of things. It is to say, however, that the whole and final justification for your life 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 you are not to be primarily concerned with dates and timetables and predictions. Rather, you are to be concerned that you are cooperating with God on the side of the good and living each day to its fullest. Then God's timetables take over.

Not too 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 before this racist government would be toppled by the power of God. And so it happened. The apartheid South African government was overmatched and didn't know it. Life will never be the same again. Thanks be to God. Amen.