

St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven
November 16, 2025

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, "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."

They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them.

"When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

"But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls." ~Luke 21:5-19

Reflecting on today's gospel flashed me directly back to a time in my life a few decades ago that was enormously challenging. Much like the images in today's passage from Luke, it felt at times as if everything was crumbling down around me. It was one of those times when nothing seemed to be going right. A mugging at knifepoint had left me anxious and bewildered. I had moved to a new neighborhood only to have my living room wall collapse. I'd pick up one of the daily papers at the subway newsstand but none of the news seemed particularly good. I liked my work as a musician but it was paradoxically both unpredictable and relentless. It was hard to see into the future. At one point, I started to have trouble sleeping. I'd wake up in the middle of the night and my thoughts would start racing. I shared some of this with friends and they did their best to help. One said, "You'll get through it." I tried my best to be strong, but I didn't feel particularly strong. Another friend recommended a kind, older doctor who offered his best advice. And then one day I sat down with my friend and colleague Mary. I knew Mary to be a wise person and I knew she was moreover a kind person and that she'd probably let me share some of this. As I talked, she smiled and nodded. When I finished, Mary expressed sympathy for all I was going through. And then she said this. "Alan, I know you. You've come through so much in your life. You've faced a lot, and here you are. Something got you through and sustained and guided you and got you here." And then she paused for a moment, smiled, leaned in just a bit and said: "Alan, if I may, that something is the Holy Spirit."

That something is the Holy Spirit. Few words have ever been so healing for me. We don't have to carry this all by ourselves. And Mary was telling me more than that. We've *never* had to carry this by ourselves. We've always had an advocate, a comforter, a guide, a holy companion. We've always had the Spirit. And this, my friends, is the message that also lies at the heart of today's eye-popping and vivid gospel with its images of the catastrophic and the cataclysmic, of conflict and violence, with its portents but most of all its promise that help is here, that hope is here, and that this help and hope is nothing less than the Holy Spirit filling us as it always has. We don't

have to *find strength* that we don't have; we don't have to try harder or just *grit our teeth*. We count, Jesus assures us, on that same Spirit.

I was fortunate enough to wander down Whitney Avenue a couple of Sundays ago to be a guest at my friend The Rev. Emily Scott's service of institution at First Presbyterian. The preacher was another friend and he offered a beautiful sermon that reflected precisely on these themes. He was talking about the strength one needs to navigate our own current moment with its enormous challenges on so many fronts. He was reflecting on those who've been able to steer through their own times of challenge, those who have been able to endure, to persevere. And here's what he said that struck me most. Perseverance, we see in scripture and we see in saints past and present isn't about the strength we find in girding our loins or gritting our teeth. It's about the strength, he said, that we find in, of all things, *surrender*. It's not about "holding ourselves together, or winning. It's instead about letting go of our certainties, and of our need to be certain. It's about shedding every weight that keeps us from love; every illusion that holiness is about keeping up appearances or being unbroken." He concluded with these words: "It's not so much about being right, or strong, or even good. It's about being in love."

That strength we need? We find it in our surrender — yes, our surrender to that love, that ground of love, that being-in-love that is the Spirit. It's certainly how Paul made it through and how he equipped his people for getting through. What the heck is going on in Thessalonica that's led him to write the letter we heard a few lines from this morning? Well, once again it's eye-popping stuff. Folks are dying. Violence and persecution are a constant threat. Many believe that the world is ending. And so when Paul writes this letter to them to encourage them to keep working, it's for a simple and very poignant reason. They've stopped working because why would you put in an eight-hour day if you think the world is about to end? Why work if you or the people you love might not make it through the day? Paul answers this question and reassures his friends the way he always does. To work, he says, is to love each other. It's to care for each other. It's to be what he calls *the body*, equipped by the Spirit, the body that needs every part and every ligament. And it's in this love and in this work for and with each other and in this body where we find hope. It's in surrender to the love that binds us, in surrender to the Spirit that sustains and guides and leads us that we find our strength and our hope. It's in *surrender* that we live again, fueled by something inexhaustible, the fire that burns forever with the light of the one who loved us all into being.

And while Thessalonica may seem a world away, it isn't. And we know it. Challenge is real across all lines of age and station and circumstance. I was with our delightful Second Grade a few days ago reading to them a beautiful book called *The Invisible Boy*. Our subject this month is kindness and the book reflects on the kindness shown by another boy to Brian, who never got chosen to be on a team, or to sit with others at lunch. Brian had felt invisible until the other boy, Justin, noticed him and began to include him. The kids loved the book and you could have heard a pin drop as I read it. I was curious and so after closing the book I asked the group "Have any of you ever felt left out or invisible?" The chorus of those sweet, soft voices all saying "yes" broke my heart and maybe it shouldn't have surprised me. I asked "If you don't mind, raise your hand if you've ever had that experience." Every hand went up. And this is a wonderful school with loving teachers and such kindness. But Mary's right. We've all *gotten through* even from the earliest age. Something has sustained and guided and led us and gotten us here. And that something, as Mary would say,

is that same Spirit that holds and sustains us through all we face today and all we'll face another day, and another.

And so we conclude where we began, with this tough yet bracingly real gospel, with its images of challenge and even of the catastrophic or cataclysmic. What does Jesus say to us through all of this? He says this. See that thing that seems so enormous and so insurmountable? It too will one day be rubble. Don't let it separate you from that ground of love that holds you, that has always held and guided you, and that always will. Look up, Jesus says, and look deeply within. The Spirit got you here this morning. The Spirit blew us all through these doors today to be with the body, the body that of sustaining love that needs and honors every member. Find your strength, Jesus says, in surrender, in shedding every weight that keeps us from love, from the *being in love* that is life in the Spirit, the life that is our eternity, and the dwelling-place that is our one and only true home, now and forever. Thanks be to God. Amen.