

“The soul of Christianity”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
November 13, 2016

I still remember my first day in prison. I remember that my clerical collar was too tight. I remember sweating as I stepped through the metal detector and watched as my Bible and papers were searched. I remember that everything was beige—the floors, the walls, the uniforms—as if not a color at all, but more an absence.

I remember being escorted to a large auditorium, where I looked out on what seemed a pitiful sight: bars on the windows, a roaring fan that did little to abate the heat, rows and rows of flimsy plastic chairs (beige, of course), an old wooden podium on wheels, and a flash of beige-suited young men, sweating and chatting softly. There were no hymnals, no pews, no worship bulletins, no musical instruments, no choir robes, no Sunday best. A few of the men did have Bibles, but that was it: a bunch of people in a locked room with pages of Scripture.

Eventually I’d get to know the stories of these men. I’d see them cry. I’d see in them little boys hiding under their bed as daddy hurt mommy. I’d see men conditioned to see prison bars long before they were ever locked up—prison bars in the color of their skin, in the place they were born, in the rows of vacant factories, abandoned houses. I’d see in them another kind of prison—the cage of depression, and of violence, and of undiagnosed learning disorders, and of sheer boredom.

And all along I remember thinking that it seemed to me a place where the soul could not survive.

Jesus’ followers, addressed in our passage from Luke this morning, are approaching such a place. In a few days, Jesus will be betrayed by one of his own. He will be arrested and beaten. He will be killed.

A few decades later, after an unsuccessful revolt, the Roman Empire will destroy most of Jerusalem, burn its temple, and kill or enslave many of the Jewish leaders. Everything that is supposed to be a sign of God’s love and protection—the temple, David’s city, the holy land, Jewish independence—will be lost. At that time, the early Christian church will struggle as a tiny, threatened minority.

Jesus warns the crowd that at that time people, even families, will turn on each other. In the Gospel of Matthew, he says that the hearts of many will grow cold and hateful and that the lives of women and other vulnerable populations will be imperiled. The faithful will be arrested and condemned. False prophets will emerge, threatening to lead the followers of Christ astray.

And through it all, God’s children will wonder, “Can our faith survive this?”

Jesus speaks, in this passage from Luke, to a crisis of faith that very well may be breaking your heart right now also. So much of what we have relied upon seems to be slipping away. Our temples—the institutions that made us feel safe and confident—are falling down all around us. Christianity no longer holds the cultural sway it once did, while all across the country churches get emptier by the year. The world itself is convulsed by change and violence and rancorous discourse. This most recent presidential election underscored a profound distrust in the institutions of American democracy. It revealed hundreds of thousands of people living in rural poverty and in declining rustbelt cities who feel forgotten, sold out in the interests of big money.

Just in the few days since the election, reports of persecution and division have filled my Facebook newsfeed. Female friends of mine have been accosted by men yelling, “Grab her by the ***”. A black woman was told to move to the back of the bus. Kindergarteners made their Hispanic classmates cry by telling them to go back to Mexico. Two men ripped off a Muslim woman’s hijab. Protestors have burned effigies of Donald Trump in the street. A group in Chicago assaulted an older white man, after a traffic altercation, while taunting him for voting for Trump. A swastika and the words “Make America White Again” were spray painted on a baseball dugout in Wellsville, New York. A black baby doll was found with a rope around its neck in an elevator at a college campus outside Buffalo. Rainbow flags were burned in Rochester. LGBT suicide hotlines saw a huge spike in calls.

In many cases, Christians are the perpetrators. They don’t have to don white hoods and burn crosses; they just have to be willing to look the other way.

It gets to where you feel like we’ve entered a place, like that prison, like that base of the cross, where the soul can’t survive.

We would like Jesus to tell us everything's going to be alright, that the church will rebound from this, that our pews will be full again one day, that we'll right the course of our culture. But instead Jesus tells us that everything we thought the church was will fall. Buildings will fall. Programs will fall. Our culture and nation will fall.

Jesus, in our passage today, has just finished trying to draw the crowd’s attention to a poor widow who has given away her last two coins. But all they can see is how beautiful the temple stones are—this temple whose outer court alone can hold 400,000 people. They fawn over the rich, and love how this temple makes them feel powerful. It doesn’t matter that the man who built up this temple, Herod, slaughtered his own family members or took from the poor. All that matters is that the temple is great again.

It’s to this crowd that Jesus offers a different kind of hope. He doesn’t say they’ll be great again. He says that they’ll find their souls. And when that temple comes down, they, no longer distracted by the beauty and power of the temple, will at last see the true soul of Christianity—

that we aren't meant to be kings; we are meant to be the ones who *witness* to kings, who remind them of the widow, and the orphan, and the undocumented stranger.

To be that witness, Jesus, we are told in Philippians, "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave" (2:7). And perhaps, it's not until we too are sitting in prison, or are persecuted for our faith, or give up our beautiful temple, that we are able to testify to this soul.

But do not be afraid, Jesus says. It'll be hard, but not a hair on your head will be lost. What matters most will survive. You—not these buildings—are the church.

In the temple's ashes, the true church will emerge: you, the people, passed through the fire, unco-opted by culture and empire. And through it all, you will meet the soul of Christianity, perhaps still yet unseen in the history of humanity.

If I can be honest, this talk of the temple falling still makes me afraid. I like our church buildings. I like my pension and healthcare. I like the power of our nation. I like the idea of the church and its pastor being popular and influential. I don't want to give this up anymore than you do.

But maybe the only time the temple doesn't fall is when we stop caring about whether it falls or stands and leave the church in order to *be* the church.

Let me tell you about the soul of that church. It was right there in that prison.

It appeared, like a small bird that had slipped through the bars and nested among us. At first, it was just a slight flutter, a little loosening of the body, a few scattered smiles, a humming. Then the wings unfolded, enveloping us, and the voices went out, and there was singing and praise and clapping. Testimonies were given. Prayers shouted. Scripture proclaimed. Forbidden hugs exchanged.

The wings were warm, and they pushed against the barred walls until they buckled and shattered—until there was only air and sunlight and green grass.

Grace had somehow slipped into our midst. The preacher didn't bring it. I certainly didn't bring it. It was there in the men, and they knew it. It was an inexplicable gift, an unremovable freedom and unvarnished dignity. There was something inside them that this prison could not take away, and their rejoicing was a way of not only saying thanks but also proclaiming it to their captors (both internal and external). With every joyous word, song, and embrace, they pumped the heart of this unnamed thing deep inside and defied the walls that sought not only to cage but also define them.

For some of them, this rejoicing would be the one thing that would keep them alive.

It also turned out to be one of their many gifts to me—a song that continued to echo in my ears as I faced prison walls of my own, confronting years of depression and buried rage.

I saw God that day. I saw what it meant to strip away all pretense and to love, and to shout out worship, because you've got nothing else. And when I finally realized that I had nothing else, I also realized that I didn't need anything else.

And for a moment, there was a breach in the sadness, and the self-doubt, and the anger, and there was only this love, only this worship, only these beautiful men, only God... only the soul of Christianity. **Amen.**