

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA**

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Sermon: “*When the End is Near, so is God*”

Daniel 12:1-3	(A prophecy of St. Michael delivering the Israelites from their enemies)
Psalm 16	(A prayer for protection, and praise for the gift of life)
Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25	(Christ has offered Himself as a sacrifice for sin, once and forever)
St. Mark 13:1-8	(Jesus prophesies about the End Times)

Americans love disaster movies. Lots of things get blown up; mobs of terrified people push against one another to flee the mayhem; it looks as though all will be lost. Then, against all odds, powerful heroes save the day. Think of films like: “The Towering Inferno,” “Independence Day,” “The Andromeda Strain,” “Titanic” or “The Poseidon Adventure.” In the end, even though there has been much devastation, the characters have survived and are appropriately humbled, wiser from having lived through the calamity.

We thought this only happened at the movies—until 9/11. Those endless video loops of the Twin Towers in flames, megatons of steel and concrete collapsing impossibly onto the streets of lower Manhattan in sky-high clouds of smoke and ash, seemed unreal enough to be just another big-budget, special-effects disaster flick. In fact, a catastrophe we never imagined possible was taking place right before our eyes.¹

Something similar happened in First Century Palestine, when, in 70 AD, the Jerusalem Temple was leveled by the Romans. In today’s Gospel, Jesus predicts this destruction of the Temple, and His disciples find it nearly impossible to comprehend. After all, predictions often turn out to be wrong.

Here are some from our own time, all made by respected individuals: Consider this *Western Union* memo from 1876: “The telephone has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication.” And, in 1943, Thomas Watson, Chairman of IBM, said: “I think there is a world market for maybe five computers.” Lee DeForest, an early 20th-century inventor who pioneered work with vacuum tubes, claimed that “while theoretically and technically television may be feasible, commercially and financially it is an impossibility.” The Decca Recording Company made a huge mistake when, in 1962, they dismissed a band visiting the US from Liverpool, England: “We don't like their sound, and guitar music is on the way out.” They were, of course, referring to “The Beatles.”²

Getting back to Jesus and His disciples, they were walking out of the Jerusalem Temple when Jesus paused, looked back, and prophesied: “Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone will be left on another. All will be thrown down.” To His Jewish listeners, God’s house was *bedrock*. *Nothing* could bring down those walls. “Oh, but teacher, look! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!”

Even the smallest stones in the Temple’s structure weighed two to three tons. Many of them weighed as much as fifty tons. The largest stone still existing is part of the Western Wall; at 13 feet long by 3 feet high, it weighs *hundreds of tons*! The stones were so immense that neither mortar nor any other binding material was used between them. Their stability came from the great weight of the stones themselves. Taller than 400 feet in one area, the Temple’s walls *towered* over Jerusalem.

Inside its walls were forty-five acres of bedrock mountain shaved flat, and in Jesus’ time, a quarter of a million people could fit comfortably within the structure. No sports arena in America even comes close to the marvel of the Jerusalem Temple.³ Its grandiosity was further enhanced by all the gold, silver and other precious materials that were used to adorn the interior, altar, and tabernacle.

Even so, shortly after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the mad Emperor Gaius Julius Caesar Germanicus—nicknamed ‘Caligula’ (meaning “little boots”)—desecrated that temple. He ordered a statue of himself to be erected in the Holy of Holies, so that he might be worshiped as god.⁴

This was the beginning of the end. The Second Temple would soon become a heap of rubble, destroyed just as the First Temple had been, in 586 BC. It is the destruction of the First Temple amidst the Babylonian exile, about which Daniel prophesies in our Old Testament lesson for today, when he refers to “a time of anguish.” Daniel was in good company. Throughout the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, as well as in most of the Hebrew prophets, there were numerous predictions that Israel would be taken into exile and that the magnificent First Temple would be levelled—as God’s punishment for the people’s unfaithfulness.

The terrible loss of life and all the associated suffering which took place were followed by a slow restoration. Six centuries later, by the time Jesus lived, Israel enjoyed a modest place among the nations of the Middle East, yet gone was the great military prowess Israel had enjoyed under King David. Also gone was their king, for Israel had been a vassal state under foreign dominion for centuries. The priesthood was corrupted and the number of godly leaders who were faithful to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was very few. There was little evidence of genuine spiritual life. However, a respectable Second Temple stood in Jerusalem, where sacrifices, offerings, and the externals of religion were well-established. At the same time, demonic activity and occult practices were escalating. Politically, the nation was divided into factions of Herodians, Hellenists, Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Scribes. Israel was sorely in need of a Savior.

Unlike the myriad predictions of the destruction of the First Temple, the four Gospels contain no warnings about the Second Temple, except for a few brief words from Jesus. Why the Temple had to be lost once again could only be explained after Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension, when the Apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit. It was then that Christ’s followers confronted the Jewish nation about their grievous sins—much as the Old Testament prophets had.

They preached that because of Jesus, God’s temple would no longer be a physical building. Rather, every believer in Christ would become God’s home, indwelt by the Holy Spirit. As St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 16:19-20 (CEV): “You should know that your body is a temple for the Holy Spirit who is in you. You have received the Holy Spirit from God. So you do not belong to yourselves, because you were bought by God for a price. So honor God with your bodies.” This was a concept that would be troublesome for first-century Jews, since they were so fixated on the physical structure of the Jerusalem Temple as the place where God lived.

But as Christians, we understand that God is not limited to any one time or location, and that only through the loss of the great temple and the coming of Christ could we become the place wherein God’s Holy Spirit can dwell when we come to faith in His Son. God gives us of His Spirit to instruct, comfort, and guide us, as well as to help us pray and to interpret Scripture.

Following the destruction of the first temple, when the Lord sent His people into exile in Babylon, He allowed them return home and to rebuild their nation after a period of chastening. And now, even though the Second Temple will soon be destroyed, and the great Diaspora will not end until 1948, Jesus is trying to assure His disciples that the Savior—the hope of all the world—has come. It is Christ who will make possible a new Israel, comprised of all who believe in, and follow, Jesus the Messiah.

Twice in Israel’s history, the Jerusalem Temple had been destroyed, the nation divided and scattered, the consequences of the people’s unfaithfulness. Amazingly, both the First and Second Temples were destroyed *on same day* on the Jewish Calendar—the 9th of Av—656 years apart.⁵ Yet through it all, God remained faithful and loving toward His own. In these parallel experiences of God’s people, we see an enduring principle: While God may discipline His children for a time, Our Lord is always in the business of restoration and renewal, of rebuilding and resurrection. And He will never forget or abandon us.

Jesus’ friends were horrified to think of their Temple in ruins. In our nuclear era, and the way things are going with earth’s climate, we face the specter of our *entire planet* being wiped out. But even if that happened, the Scriptures assure us God would be there.

He has promised never to forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:8, Matthew 28:20). We can take heart from Psalm 42 (2-3): “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth is transformed and the mountains are toppled into the depths of the seas, though their waters roar and foam and the mountains quake in the surge.”

On a smaller—but perhaps no less traumatic—scale, when it seems as though *your* world is crashing in around you, and you feel as though you’re starring in your own personal disaster movie, remember: God is with you, and He is your best hope—along with the prayerful support of others—for getting you through to the other side ‘in one piece.’

Along the way, we ask for grace to trust in God’s unwavering care, and pray for His protection, as did the writer of today’s psalm, as he concludes: “You will show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy.” Think about it! If we stay close to God, His Spirit will be the compass and road map that point us in the right direction, and lead us to the rest stops along the way, where we can spend quality time with Him. It may seem, at times that The End is near—and someday, it *will be!*—but also, God will be near us, forever and ever.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, You know all things, and all things are under Your control. Thank You for providing us with accounts of Your faithfulness to, and kindness toward, Your people in the past. Most of all, we thank You for sending us Jesus to love us and to teach us. We praise You for Your gift of the Holy Spirit, whose temple we are. Help us to care for that temple well, knowing that You live within us. And grant that, being led by Your Spirit, we may be encouraged and uplifted by Your strong presence, now and all our days—no matter how difficult they may become. This we ask through Christ our Lord, to whom be glory and praise forever and ever. Amen.

¹ Adapt. N. George Hacker, “The Holy Spirit: The Best GPS,” 15 November 2009, St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

² Charles R. Swindoll, “Consider These Famous Predictions That ...” [SermonCentral.com](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/28427/on-stories-by-charles-r-swindoll), 25 July 2006 <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/28427/on-stories-by-charles-r-swindoll> 8 November 2021. Used with permission.

³ Adapt. “Illustrations,” [Sermons.com](https://www.sermons.com), 14 November 2009 <illustrations@CLERGY.NET> Used with permission.

⁴ Lambert Dolphin, “The Destruction of the Second Temple” [TempleMount.org](http://www.templemount.org/destroy2.html), n.d. <http://www.templemount.org/destroy2.html> 8 November 2021.

⁵ Dolphin, *ibid.*