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Pentecost 23, Year C

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St. Paul's, Cleveland Heights, OH

Isaiah 67:17-25; Canticle 9; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

As I find myself now firmly in my late 30's, I have discovered an unexpected place where I must confront my own mortality about once a month or so: the hair salon. You see, about once a month, I go and get my hair cut. I sit in the chair, and as I watch the stylist cut and clip and trim and buzz, I have noticed that with the passage of time, each month, there seems to be more and more gray hair accumulated on the floor after each haircut. Each month, I pay a grooming professional to remind me that I am getting older, I am changing, I am not in possession of near as much dark brown hair as I use to be. Time demands that I relinquish more and more of it as more and more time goes by. I am reminded that nothing lasts forever- not even the color of my hair.

We hear Jesus teaching his disciples about this reality of nothing lasting forever in Luke's Gospel today. He tells his disciples that "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." This conversation with his disciples happens right before Jesus begins to prepare for his own passion, begins to prepare for his own death. In fact, in his words throughout this whole chapter (only a portion of which we heard today), we can sense in Jesus's words perhaps some anxiety he had about preparing for the end. Jesus was, after all, human as well as divine. And as human, was no doubt deeply acquainted with our tendency toward discomfort about things not lasting forever, things coming to an end.

And what does Jesus use as a tool to teach his disciples about this reality of nothing lasting forever? The temple. He predicts the temple's destruction. As the disciples were admiring the shiny stones and majestic columns and various other lavish appointments of the temple, Jesus reminds them that none of the stones or the columns or any of the appointments will last forever. Not even a stone will be left upon another stone. And indeed, just about four decades later, the temple was destroyed.

This wasn't the first time, either, that God's people had to confront this reality through seeing their temple destroyed. In the reading we heard from the prophet Isaiah today, we meet up with the prophet late in his book when he is consoling God's people who had witnessed the destruction of their first temple and then were forced into exile for decades. After God's people were freed and allowed to return to their homeland, Isaiah encourages them in the words we heard today. They no doubt were heartbroken, forlorn, felt hopeless and helpless after spending years and lifetimes away from all they knew, away from the center of their common life together. Perhaps some had even given up on God. The people were in exile so long that grandkids and great grandkids were born into exile with no memory of the temple or their homeland. Upon being freed, Isaiah, with his words, stirs the spirits of the people from being hopeless and apathetic toward joy and hope. Speaking as a mouthpiece for God, He tells them, "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind."

In the midst of their despair, the prophet Isaiah speaks truth to apathy, he speaks hope to despair. He reminds the people that in the midst of all they have suffered and painfully experienced, those things are not the end. For, even though nothing lasts forever, God is always making things new. Isaiah's words remind us that God does not shield us from the pain of life, but, if we make space, God does show up in the midst of our pain and create new possibilities for life to happen. With God, the reality of nothing lasting forever is simply an opportunity for new birth and creativity and possibility. If we are willing to face what is in front of us, anchor ourselves into the hope of our eternal God, we can cling to God's promise that though nothing lasts forever, God is always, always, always making things new.

And coming back to Jesus, we are reminded of this divine reality in Jesus's own passion and death. In sure and certain confidence that God is always making things new, Jesus entered into his own passion and death and rose victorious over death and hell and the grave. Jesus's death was an opportunity for God to show up and make all things new, and indeed in the resurrection of Jesus, he made all of us new and continues to make all of us new. In just a moment, we will come forward and participate in this reality of God making all things new by consuming the very icon of new life in the body and blood of Jesus. "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind."

Each month, as I leave the hair salon, having participated again in a monthly ritual of confronting my own mortality, I have found myself getting into my car, looking in the mirror, and thinking, that new gray hair looks GOOD! I'm learning to let this monthly ritual not only teach me about this reality of nothing lasting forever, but also remind me that God is always making all things new. I may not have a head full of exclusively dark brown hair anymore, but I am liking more and more what I see in the mirror, this new thing that God is creating before my very eyes.

This morning, the bad news is that nothing lasts forever. But here's the good news: God is always making things new.

Let us pray.

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.