

Sermon on 25 Pentecost C: Luke 21:5-19, primary; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13, secondary
Preached at Custer Lutheran Fellowship, November 18, 2007, by Pastor David Van Kley

Not Even a Single Hair

Perhaps, like me, you've owned old cars. The older they get, the more noises they make and the less reliable they are. We owned one car—a Ford Pinto—that blew up on the highway, on a trip to Minneapolis. Another—a Chevy Cavalier wagon—broke down not once, not twice, but **three times** on the same vacation!

When you own an old car, the fact that it won't last forever is always on your mind. You wonder: is it worth fixing that rattle in the dashboard, balancing those old tires, repairing its broken windshield? Will it run long enough to justify the expense? Do I dare drive take it on a trip?

Today's texts have to do with things not lasting forever. And with how we are to live in the face of that truth.

The other day, I saw Nina Joy's picture with other students in the Luther Seminary magazine. It's been three and a half months since Nina left us and we miss her. Some of us knew she would be leaving long before she did. She kept dropping hints, without giving a specific date. While we didn't know the day or the hour, we knew it was coming, that Nina wouldn't be with us forever. The thought was always there, affecting our relationship, our planning.

As a child, you overhear mommy or daddy say that grandma isn't going to live very long. You love your grandma and so are plunged into worry. "When will this happen?" you ask. Another time, while you're lying in bed, you hear your parents fighting downstairs and it occurs to you that one may leave the other. From then on, that possibility is always in the back of your mind, along with the question: "What will happen to me?"

Life is a series of endings, big and small. A small ending whenever July fades into August and "back to school signs" appear in the department store. A bigger ending when the moving van pulls up outside the home of your good friend. A still bigger ending when the oncologist tells you your cancer is incurable: all they can do is slow it down. Death is an ending we all must face. Even if you're young and cancer-free, the fear of it may rise up in you and stick to your heart like Velcro. Why am I short of breath? Why does my stomach hurt so often? Am I dying?

And then, there is the ultimate ending, the fear of which is lodged in the back of our minds. Greenhouse warming is a slow threat to our planet's survival. "When will it happen?" we ask. "What can we do?" An act of nuclear terrorism could wipe out half—even all—of the earth. Does Iran have the bomb? Will it fall into the hands of Al Qaeda? Or we come out of the grocery store to find a threatening brochure neatly tucked under the windshield wiper: "Jesus is coming to judge the earth. Are you ready?"

The question of endings was very much on the disciples' minds when they arrived in Jerusalem. They knew that Jesus was walking into the arms of people who hated him. For a moment, the grand scale of Herod's temple distracted them. "Goodness," they said; "this place is fantastic!" But Jesus said, "it's going down; not one stone will be left upon another." It's hard for us to understand how devastating that would have been for first century Jews. It would be like telling Americans that the White House would be bombed to smithereens or telling residents of Custer County that the gates of Custer State Park would be permanently locked. The anxious disciples want to know: "When will this happen? Will we be able to tell? What should we do!"

Jesus says a lot in response. A whole lot of stuff—bad stuff—is going to happen: earthquakes, wars, famines, plagues. But those events won't signal the end. People will predict the day and the hour, but that they will be wrong and are not to be trusted. Life will be difficult for them as his followers, they will face opposition from religion and government. They will be betrayed, persecuted, even put to death. But the key thing Jesus says, in my estimation, is this: **"Not a hair of your head will perish."**

That's because the key question on our minds is always, "what will happen to us?" Jesus says, "not a hair of your head will perish." It's a promise rooted in Jesus' own cross and resurrection. Even if you are destroyed, Jesus was saying, you will **not** be destroyed. Even if you die, you will **not** die, but **live**. Even if the cancer eats away your vital organs, not a hair of your head will perish. Even if a terrorist bomb levels your office building, not a hair of your head will perish. Even if you're the only to stand up for a kid being bullied in the hall, not a hair of your head will perish.

Jesus speaks here like a mother or father to a child. Even if the worst thing you can imagine happens, if our marriage should end in divorce, we will **always** love you. Not a hair of your head will perish.

We spent last Sunday with friends in Vancouver, BC, where one of them teaches in a seminary. Sharon described the religious situation in Vancouver. Only 3-5% of the people attend church on a given Sunday. Many people are openly hostile to Christianity. Sharon believes that her old seminary will close its doors within a few years. And in a bayside park, the artistic centerpiece is a church turned upside down, its steeple buried in the ground. I took a picture of it.

Listening to our friends, I was filled with foreboding. It sounded to me like Jesus saying, "The church is going down; not one stone will be left upon another." I thought, "When will this happen? What are the signs? What can I do? What will happen to us?" But this week, I have heard Jesus say, "Not a hair of your head will perish." The victory of faith is to claim this promise from the crucified and risen Savior. Again and again.

In the face of so many endings and in light of God's powerful promise, how shall we live? The answers are there in both the gospel and second readings. "Endure."

“Persevere.” “Don’t be weary in doing what is right.” Tell the story of Jesus. Be a witness. Don’t worry about what you will say—the words will come to you. Love your neighbor. Work for justice. Care for the suffering. Know that you are part of God’s great design. Live. For not a hair of your head will perish.

Winston Churchill, the great British statesman who saw England through World War II, gave the shortest commencement address on record to a college class. He said, “Don’t give up. Don’t ever give up. Never give up.” That was it. The whole speech.

And this is how we are to live in the face of so many endings, armed with God’s sure promise in Christ.

Recently, I spoke with my friend Dale, a retired bishop. About three years ago, Dale was diagnosed with a rare, terminal illness. At the time, his doctors told him that he’d have five relatively good years, during which time medications would control the disease, but then would require blood transfusions every week, while his health declined steeply.

When I asked him how he was doing, Dale said that his blood levels were dropping, but he was OK. He and his wife, Jo, had just returned from a trip to the Canadian Rockies—they’d never seen Banff before. “It was glorious,” Dale said. “My next challenge in life is not to become a crabby old man. I don’t want that to happen.” That’s endurance. That’s perseverance. Daring to drive the old car until it gives out.

And behind that lies Dale’s faith. When I talked to him three years ago, I was devastated. But Dale said, “We’re all terminal, Dave; it’s not the end of the world.” I’ve thought about that many times since. You go to the airport terminal in Rapid: it’s not just a place where journeys end. It’s a place of endings and beginnings. You fly to the Denver terminal or the Minneapolis terminal or the Salt Lake terminal. And then you fly or drive somewhere else. Terminal means beginning as much as it means ending, resurrection as well as death.

In Christ, all of our endings are beginnings. For “not a hair of your head will perish.” Amen.