

I love New York

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, November 14, 2010: The Twenty-Fifth Sunday After Pentecost.
Based on Luke 21:5-19.*

I love New York.

I wrote my regular Friday eLetter under that title a few weeks ago, and I got more replies and feedback from all of you than for anything I've ever written online. So, I guess you love New York as well.

In that letter I described exploring bike routes in my new neighborhood. In particular, I was trying to find the access to the Manhattan Bridge. As I coasted down under the bridge to East Broadway, this is part of what I wrote of what I saw there:

There was an earnestness and a joy to the whole scene. I looked at the people, the goods, the street names of Old New York: Madison, Christie and Eldridge, Division, Henry and Pike, Peck Slip. And the dusty downtown skyline. And the signs in an array of languages. I wanted to hug everyone. I wanted to paint the scene. I was psyched.

The energy I thought that was spent at the end of a working day came rushing back and—full disclosure here—I escaped work early that day so that I could ride before it got dark. And maybe that's the key to living here. If you step out on the street and sag, you might as well go home. But if you touch the pavement and feel a rush, then New York is for you. But there's also a grind here. And though I may be a romantic, I well know that in the scene that thrilled me that day there is also poverty, fatigue and the weight on souls that come from effort in the face of fear and want.

St. Bart's, far uptown from Old New York is nevertheless New York, through and through. Though we cultivate the universality of our faith and create a worship climate of quiet and focus and beauty, we track in the streets when we enter through those portals each Sunday. We bring the people of God's city with us right up the aisle.

Now all of this is just a prelude to a reflection on the pre-advent themes: the prophecies, the end time words that we get in today's two lessons. Here is from the late prophet, Isaiah, in the 6th century B.C.E., "I am about to create new heavens and a new earth. Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating, for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight."

The prophet lays out the picture of a renewed and a renewing city. His words were directed at the group of Jews who were allowed by Cyrus, the Persian King, to come home. They found the destruction of the Temple, they found the decline of the city, but they also heard these words of hope: "They shall build houses and inhabit them. They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit, they shall not build and another inhabit, they shall not plant and another eat." These great words of hope are directed to cities. The really great words of hope in the Bible are urban words. In spite of the well-known parables of sowers and seeds and sheep and pastures, these are city people and we are city people. We work out our lives, our spiritual journeys, in the city.

Now the words about Jesus, placed just before the Passion—going to Jerusalem and seeing the Temple—are words that have been classified as "apocalyptic," words for the end of time. Scholars are not sure that Jesus did or would have said these words himself.

But, you have to give Luke credit. Luke's book was published after the destruction of the Second Temple. So, the story is a little bit like the story that the returning exiles from Babylon faced. There had already been a moment of destruction and the words of hope that we get from Jesus, here, are a little different from the words of the prophet.

Luke, of course, thought it would be wonderful if Jesus had said these things because that would make him a prophet. If he knew, and said, they were going to destroy the Temple,

does that raise the stock of Jesus very far? Almost everyone in Jerusalem knew that the power of the Romans and the vigor of life in that Temple couldn't coexist for much longer anyway. I don't think we need to pump Jesus up that way, so I chose to be agnostic about whether he said it.

But I think what he stood for was this: if you face or experience destruction in your life, it's an opportunity to rebuild. And those are the great words of hope. I don't think Jesus needed to scare people straight. I don't think he would've said, *it's the end of the world, so clean up your act*. Because I think the promise of God is *behold I am doing new things—a new creation. I am helping you rebuild your city*.

Being religious, being Christian, in New York, is to become aware of living in a cycle of precariousness—of destruction in some cases—and then of re-creation. That's the arc of the narrative of the Bible.

We're given a lot of gifts and one of them is that it makes sense to rebuild and that it is possible to rebuild. I came across a wonderful piece or reverie about New York, another romantic writing about New York.

The writer and novelist, Robert Day recalling the time as a teenager in Kansas that he got hold of Joseph Mitchell's book about McSorley's Pub in the East Village. Eventually he was able to come to New York, driving from Kansas. House-sitting near Washington Square, he McSorley's Pub, which he not only read about in Mitchell, but he'd seen the iconic paintings by the artist John Sloan.

Day went there to see if it looked like what the paintings said, and sounded like what Joseph Mitchell had written. But most of all, he'd been captivated by a poem by e.e. cummings, whose editor entitled it "Snug and Warm inside McSorley's." and in the poem are these words,

*I was sitting in mcsorley's.
outside it was new york
and beautifully snowing*

Robert Day was sitting there on a summer's day and "outside it was beautifully snowing" would have to wait. So, he made a promise to himself that day, a promise that he would return one winter night to say, "to live inside the language of that poem."

To live inside the language of that poem.

I've seldom heard a more true and descriptive line about what Jesus invites us to do. *To live inside the meaning of the poem*. We are living inside the language of the poem that the whole of the Biblical story is that life is a gift:

That we are put here to enjoy it.

That we are created free, free enough to mess it up.

Free enough, certainly, to live inside the poem and make it better and more just. And more peaceful.

This is the promise. This is the hope. To live inside the language of this poem and promise. Jesus had a vision. Not of destruction, but of building a life and of welcoming all to the table. Of love made real. So, *outside it is New York*. Go and be part of its new creation. Amen.

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