A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

*“The Reality of Impermanence”*

Mark 13

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Look! What wonderful stones, what wonderful buildings!

The first time I visited the Duke University campus, I was only interested in one thing, one building, finding Cameron Indoor Stadium. For all of its renown, it’s just a little squatty building, tucked between other college-looking buildings. That’s part of its charm, of course. We were driving around the campus looking for it. I rolled down my window. “Can you show me where to find Cameron?” “It’s right there.” She pointed to the little stone building. “I mean the basketball stadium,” I said. “That’s it.” “Where the team plays?” “Yes, that’s it, right there,” she said. You have to hunt for Cameron to find it.

No such challenge is posed if you’re looking for Duke Chapel, the massive tower piercing the clouds, the envy of every church building. Duke Chapel is at the end of a long road leading dramatically to its doorstep at the heart of the campus. It’s really stunning on the outside and the inside, a Gothic marvel, now a century old. The first time I visited the Duke campus as a potential seminary student, I asked my host, “Do you ever get tired of seeing the chapel? Do you get numb to this?” My host thought for a moment, looked up at the tower, “No, I can honestly say no. I’m taken by it every time.” I had the same response for all the years we spent there. I never grew tired, weary, or numb of seeing the beauty of the chapel on the outside or, even more, the inside. I would write sermons for my little country church while sitting in a wooden pew in the transept of the stone Gothic wonder with stain-glass illumination hopefully illuminating my sermons.

“Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones, what wonderful buildings.” The disciples of Jesus had an eye for architectural beauty it seems. The Temple was surely the most beautiful, and probably the largest man-made structure they ever saw in their lives. Built of the finest materials by the most accomplished craftsmen, perched on the highest peak of the highest point in the holiest city they knew, constructed in honor of the One True God, the Temple commanded awe. It was superlative in every way. The disciples’ word for it doesn’t even translate particularly well. It means large, but more than large, beautiful but more than beautiful. It’s awesome. It’s amazing. It’s transcendent. It’s wonderful. It’s beyond words.

“Look, Teacher, look at this.” Was Jesus not looking? Did he not see what was around him? They’d come a long way from Galilee to get here. Did it not seem that Jesus took notice? Was this like a parent with distracted children saying, “We’ve driven a long way to see the Grand Canyon. Now look at it! Appreciate where you are!”

I’ve seen some beautiful places in my life, churches in particular. Afloat upon ethereal tides, St. Paul above the city rides. The Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. St. Peter’s in Rome. The church in Florence so large they didn’t know how to finish it when they started. It simply became known as The Duomo. The Dome. Milan Cathedral with columns the size of sequoias. Canterbury Cathedral. The Crystal Cathedral in LA. St. Patrick’s in New York City. Kyle Field in College Station. Holy places.

There’s a reason why Christians from time to time build marvelous structures that go way beyond the utilitarian need to give people a dry place to sit. As Margaret Visser writes, A church, even an ordinary church, ''is a recognition, in stone and wood and brick, of spiritual awakenings . . . A collective memory of spiritual insights, of thousands of mystical moments.'' She’s right, or at least that’s my experience. A church, especially a beautiful place of worship, is itself a prayer-made material. It’s more than a warehouse for religious activity. When done well, the church itself is a prayer.

The Temple outside of which the disciples stood in amazement was certainly intended to be that way. In Solomon’s original construction in the 800s BC, in the reconstruction by the exiles in the 400s BC, and in Herod’s fixer-upper in the disciples’ lifetimes, the Temple was itself a prayer of confession: you are our God and you are awesome. The Temple was a place for prayer and it was a prayer. It was a place for confession and it was a confession. It was a place for faith, and it was an act of faith. Churches can carry this meaning, when done well.

But there’s something more, especially for places like the Temple, and marvelous cathedrals, but maybe it’s also true of anything we love. They give us the impression of permanence. It’s a funny thing that happens in the human mind. We can see the dirt cleared, watch the stones be stacked, even stack them ourselves We can watch a building be built from when it wasn’t there until it is there. Then, when it is finished, not too long after, it seems like it was always there. We can hardly remember when it wasn’t there. Things seem to have permanence. And the bigger, more marvelous thing it is, the more it seems like it’s always been there, and more importantly, will always be there.

Permanence. Things that endure. Oh how we need some things that endure. Among the ancient Greeks there were two wildly divergent ways of experiencing the world. Parmenides believed that nothing ever changed. All things stayed the same. Heraclitus, on the other hand, said all things flow like a river, nothing abides. You never step in the same river twice. Heraclitus is describing a world that seems pretty familiar, in which nothing stays the same. I don’t know what world Parmenides was living in.

Kurt’s death makes me especially mindful of this reality this week, of the flow of the river of time. Things don’t stay the same. Temples fall, empires crumble, the music goes silent. Friends die. Everything changes. The river flows and it never stays the same. For some of you, Kurt’s name is just a name of someone for you. I understand where you’re coming from. You’ve heard his name, but if you’ve only come since this summer, you’ve maybe never heard his music. You know some people are mourning his loss. You’re sensitive to that, and you feel it as compassion for others. I get that and appreciate it. For some folks here, Kurt hunched over the piano making it come to life is THE iconic image of DaySpring. It’s what church feels like, looks like, sounds like.

For ten years, I had a front row seat to Kurt Kaiser’s musical interpretations of our worship. Without a written note in front of him, he would take worship and give it wings. Shortly after I arrived at DaySpring, a writer from *Leadership Journal* or *Christianity Toda*y called. He had heard about worship at DaySpring and had a few questions about contemplative Baptists, what a weird bunch -- I could hear in his voice. I told him about our worship and I said that one of the best parts is at the end of the service when Kurt will gather up everything that’s happened in worship and then play, while children take up the offering. He will play an offering of his own, a musical prayer that has been born of him during the service. “Oh how nice,” he said a little absentmindedly, not fully appreciating what I was trying to tell him. He was scratching notes to himself. “What’s the name of your pianist again?” “Kurt. Kurt Kaiser.” Pause. Long Pause. “THE Kurt Kaiser?” And that was all it took. From then on, Kurt was The Kurt Kaiser when we wanted to needle him a little bit and get him laughing at himself, which he loved to do often.

Kurt had a lightness to him, and I mean that in both ways: light in his eyes and light on his feet. He had a way of helping us remember what was important and why, and what you just take in stride. I think Kurt would have had a hearty laugh at the chaos around him on the morning he died. I don’t mean to make light of that sacred moment at all, but we’ve all had a good laugh about it since then. What else can you do when in the driveway is the preacher’s car and a hearse and an electrician's truck and a plumber’s van? The poor Kaisers had a gas leak under their home. You could smell it and no matter how bad the timing, and it could hardly have been worse, especially for those poor workmen trying to do their work as respectfully as possible, they knew they couldn’t wait another day to deal with this. So there Kurt lay, with a furtive electrician under the house, a plumber solemnly trying to fix leaky gas pipes, and a family trying to be sensitive to Kurt’s needs and reverent to the mystery of his death. It was bitterly cold those few days, but I shuddered when they told me how the night before, not realizing they had a gas leak in the house one of them had tried to light the gas logs with a fire starter. Click. Click. Click. Oh Lord have mercy, I thought. This house is about to explode and there’s the man who literally wrote, “It only takes a spark to get a fire going.” Talk about not one stone remaining on top of another!

The pain of unwelcome change and loss can be disorienting, even despairing. The feeling of a DaySpring piano without a Kurt is not unlike what the disciples must have felt at Jesus’ suggestion that there will be a temple mount without a temple. It’s just almost impossible to wrap your mind around such a thing.

But change always comes to temples, empires, families, and churches. We know this. Jesus knew this too. Look at the beautiful Temple, Teacher. Look at these marvelous buildings. Look again, Jesus replies, see the truth of all created things. One stone will not remain on another. Contrary to what you may have heard, when Jesus goes apocalyptic he’s not predicting future events, he’s speaking the hidden truth of present realities. This temple, this world, now, is not as stable or as eternal as it seems at first look. (Willimon, *Sermon for Every Week*).

This can be a despairing word. The author of Ecclesiastes, likewise, considers everything he sees. I picture him sitting on his front porch, slowly rocking in his rocking chair, puffing on a pipe. Maybe because that’s how I remember my granddad -- quiet, sitting there contemplating the world and its meaning. The author of Ecclesiastes’ appraisal of the world is that everything is *hevel*, a word sometimes translated as meaningless or vanity, “Vanity, vanity, all is vanity.” But a closer meaning is smoke, woodsmoke, pipe smoke, wafting and disappearing. “What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun?,” he asks anyone who will listen. “Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.”

Jesus isn’t even sure about that. In one unblinking sentence, Jesus dislodges any idea of earthly permanence. If the Temple can fall, so can everything else. See these great buildings, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down. It can be a despairing word for sure. Yet even Jesus’ dim appraisal of earthly things ends with a note of hope. The suffering, the pain, is not empty or fruitless, but it is the pain of childbirth. That’s how Jesus describes the pain of change . . .the pain of childbirth. It’s the agony that brings forth new life.

And I think that’s what was on his mind that day under the gleaming gold of Herod’s Temple: death and new life. His own, and that experienced by all creation. St. Paul will talk about death and life as a grain planted that dies and then brings forth new wheat. Every new life is born from some change and some death.

In speaking of life’s impermanence, Jesus was merely speaking plainly about the reality of the world we can see if we look honestly. In speaking of hope and life in the midst of it, he was speaking of the reality of the world if we look faithfully. This is Christian hope. Our trust is in God who is forever, in love which endures when all else fails, and in life in Christ, which cannot be defeated, even by death. Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?

When three famous musicians, Buddy Holly, Ricky Valens, and Big Bopper Richardson tragically died sixty years ago in a plane crash, they said it was the day the music died. That line crossed my mind this week. On the day Kurt died, we would not hear him play again at DaySpring or see his fingers dance across the keys again. I despaired. It was the day the music . . .

But I knew immediately, before the line was even done trailing across my mind, that that thought was just wrong. And I’m so glad for it. It wasn’t the day the music died. Kurt’s music does not die because it was not his. It is bigger than he was, this Music, that found in him a perfectly pitched tuning fork so the rest of us could hear sometimes what Kurt heard all the time. At the service on Friday, Terry York said that Kurt not only had perfect pitch but had mystical pitch. His music was the music of the spheres, the hum of the universe, the song of angels unending praise, the rocks crying out in perfect harmony, a congregation singing the songs of life. It wasn’t Kurt’s to give life. It lives, and he just stepped into the flow. And he helped us step into the flow. It lives on.

As long as there are gentle spirits, the music lives on.

As long as there is someone, somewhere attuned to mystery

As long as there is a church that sings hymns and prays in silence

As long as there are musicians who study, and prepare, and then let ‘er rip

when the lights are on

As long as the rivers flow over singing stones, the music lives on.

Kurt’s death leaves a hole in our lives, an empty space in our sight, something like a temple mount without a temple. But Kurt was always a master of empty spaces, of the silence between the notes, and the servant of a Lord who is the master of empty tombs. Now, at his death, he becomes part of the gentle, but profound silence giving those who keep listening ears to hear the sacred song that plays on in this church he loved so very much. Kurt won’t be with us any longer, but his spirit endures, the music endures, his lightness and mirth endure here in this place.

Kurt is gone from us, but even in that darkness, new life is born. On the same day Kurt passed from this life, a baby was born to Bill and Whitney Walker. New life is born. On the day Kurt was buried, Guy Kemper’s adoption was finalized. A new chapter in life begins for a young boy and a family. And two families rejoiced. And we rejoice with them. These are holy days.

Oh, we’re going to miss our friend. As long as DaySpring endures, more sure than these stones standing on one another, the spirit will live on. The music lives. God is good. And I offer one more thing, an ending that is also a new beginning, our common greeting that is also a word of assurance, and a confession of faith, and an anointing. I offer this, asking, and truly needing your assurance for my own grieving heart.

Friend, The Lord is with you

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them up to the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Alleluia. Amen.

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