

Sermon for the Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost: Luke 21:5-9

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Just north of town, perched on a small rise overlooking the vast, open plain of the Wal*Mart parking lot, a sentinel stood guarding the main drag. A small, white building with blue trim and dueling drive-thrus, Captain D's Seafood Kitchen dutifully watched cars go by, cars turn in, and once in a while, cars stall as the red light turned to green and new drivers forgot how to make the clutch and the gear shift and their brains work all at the same time. Truth be told, I didn't frequent the Captain D's all that much. I liked it just fine; actually, I really liked it. To be clear, while Captain D's is seafood, I didn't go there for the fish. When I went there, I went there for the batter. Fried anything is good, even if it's just fried fried. But I've always been skeptical of seafood when the sea is more than a state border away. Arkansas has its share of lakes and rivers, so catfish and trout deserve to be on the menu. But cod? I just can't imagine cod figuring out a natural way to land on my plate. I'd seen enough cattle wading in ponds to consider them a more natural seafood in Arkansas than cod ever could be.

So, I steered clear of Captain D's. That said, Captain D's was a marker of civilization. Coming from the north, back then, you'd clear the curves coming down a steep mountainside, and most all you'd seen for the past 20 miles were rolling hills, tree branches hanging across the road, and the occasional small town springing up to support an antique store. Then, the trees moved further back from the asphalt, you could just make out the roofline of the Bear Creek Springs Baptist Church, and the Arkansas State Welcome Center swung into view. You were still on the outskirts of something, but it wasn't until Captain D's broke the horizon that you knew a town of consequence lay ahead. It was like passing a guardpost or a gate left open. Behind you lay wilderness, ahead lay chain stores and strip malls and actual restaurants worth stopping at. Captain D's was your way in.

One day, that idea ceased to be a metaphor. In the middle of the night, when no one was around, thank God, a truck driver had somehow made his way through the tricky, winding, not-at-all lit roads leading into town -- down the mountainside, past the Baptist Church, and right to the edge of town -- all while dozing in and out of vehicular awareness. When he woke up, his rig was perched where the sentinel had only just been. Somehow, when sleep caught up with him, he veered off the road and directly through the middle of Captain D's. No one was inside, no one was injured, but the Seafood Kitchen was gone, not one stone left on another. Now, I know I said I didn't spend much time there, but I still felt a loss. Somehow, to my small town brain, it felt like we'd lost something cosmopolitan. I mean, it was a *seafood* place, after all, even if the idea of seafood that far inland weirded me out. It was like the forces that kept small towns small had targeted the one thing that could've pulled us up into something better.

It really was a weird sensation. It wasn't my first experience of loss, not by a long shot, but it's the first time I remember a building that had some kind of meaning going away. It was a landmark for me more than anything, and now that landmark was gone. And that's the part of losing Captain D's that really mattered. It was a landmark, and landmarks get heaped up with meaning. They're more than mile markers. They're signs of destinations close by, or at least of being on the way. And often what you're on the way to is home. Landmarks point us to those places, and the loss of a landmark hurts, even if it's a silly fast food place that kinda weirded you out.

The loss of Captain D's also meant that other things could be lost. Buildings seem so permanent, especially when they have lines of cars waiting for what's inside, and even more so when directions to Wal*Mart include them. But if a landmark could be lost, then what does that say about the thing they're marking? If Captain D's could be lost, then what about my home? What about my hometown? What about all

these things I think I can trust to be there? I know, it's a little strange that my first, real existential crisis came at the hands of fried fish. At school, kids joked about the driver losing control of his truck because he hit an oil slick from all the frying that was going on inside. But I was all torn up about it.

These days, an Arby's has taken over the lonely sentinel's post overlooking Wal*Mart and marking the divide between civilization and wilderness. It's not as exotic as seafood, but I'd be more likely to trust it, seeing as how Arby's comes with food you can imagine close by. Even so, it's weird when I go back and I see that ten gallon hat where the fish fry used to be. Even the road into town is different. The Baptist Church and those winding roads with low-hanging branches have been cut off by big stretches of gray that don't give any heed to the curves of the land or where generations-old houses sat. Imminent domain carved a straight line up and over, and landmarks now are bent guardrails or the occasional and very slight turns of the wheel. Even the roads changed. And when I go back to that part of the world these days, I am unmoored. I couldn't tell you how to get from one side of town to the other, but put me in a car, and I can get there. I don't remember the names of the streets, and some of 'em have changed. I don't recognize the new stores, but I remember the ones that used to occupy the same buildings. And that just adds to the confusion. I've had roots there, but it's like when I pulled those roots up, someone came along behind me and filled in the gaps with packing peanuts. Going back, I expect to be able to rest my roots where they used to lie, but they don't fit, and they're not sturdy, and there's no way for me to get down to where life came from.

But that's just the thing. As much as places and landmarks and homes are important, they aren't where life comes from. All things come from God. But it's so easy, subconscious even, for us to invest what we see as permanent things with the trust we should be giving to God. God didn't leave because Captain D's left, or because the roads changed, or because my hometown doesn't fit anymore. God didn't leave at all. Changes came, time passed, I changed, but God remains.

That's what Jesus is talking about. His followers gawk at the magnificence of the Temple, the beautiful stone work and the Glory of God it must point to. It's a landmark, definitely, but it's so much more. It's a symbol of home, it's the center of the City, even the heart of the people. But in time, it'll go away, too. The Roman Empire'll plow right through it, leaving no stone standing on another. And that'll be a terrible loss. The roads will change. The City won't feel right anymore. The people will (and probably should) grieve. But God remains.

I suppose what I'm getting at is that we can't help but invest some trust in the permanence of earthly things. How many of us checked to make sure the road was still where we thought it should be before driving in today? Probably not many. We have to trust in the permanence of things to a degree, but we also have to know that all things come to an end. And that's a greater trust, a trust in the permanence of God.

This all reminds me of a passage from one of Wendell Berry's books, *Jayber Crow*. He says, "I whisper over to myself the way of loss, the names of the dead. One by one, we lose our loved ones, our friends, our powers of work and pleasure, our landmarks, the days of our allotted time. One by one, the way we lose them, they return to us and are treasured up in our hearts. Grief affirms them, preserves them, sets the cost. Finally a man stands up alone, scoured and charred like a burnt tree, having lost everything and (at the cost only of its loss) found everything, and is ready to go. Now I am ready." I think Berry's "I am ready" means accepting the losses that always come and trusting, that in spite of all them, God remains. In spite of family or places or not-even-all-that-good fast food joints lost, God remains. And we, we are ready.