

Seeing Beneath

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November 16, 2025

Today's scripture finds Jesus right before the last supper. He and the disciples are in Jerusalem. The week started off well with the parade and throwing money changers out of the temple, but the mood has shifted. Though they must sense the danger, the disciples still find themselves admiring the temple. Likely because "they're expecting — hoping! — that Jesus, precisely as the long-awaited Messiah, will now act with power and glory, one way or another vanquishing the Roman occupiers and the death-dealing powers they represent." The disciples look at the temple and think about how all of its power and wealth will soon be theirs.

Because, let's be clear, this temple was not just some ordinary temple or building. "This temple occupied a platform twice as large as the Roman Forum and four times as large as the Athenian Acropolis. Herod reportedly used so much gold to cover the outside walls that anyone who gazed at them in bright sunlight risked blinding herself."

Remember, Herod was appointed by the Roman Senate to be the "King of the Jews" overseeing all of Judea. In the building of this temple, no doubt Herod hoped the ostentatious display of wealth would convince people of his power and might. And obviously, for some it did.

But, Jesus was always good at seeing through outward displays to what lay beneath them. What Jesus saw when he looked at the temple and all its ostentatious gold was greed, a hunger for power, and perhaps most dangerous, a leader whose own insecurities led him to crave these kinds of outward displays of power. Beneath the surface of all that gold lay a cruelty that didn't care about the slaves who toiled and died to build that temple, nor the harm to the earth inevitable in taking so much so quickly. Beneath the gold lay an indifference to the poor who were starving while paying their ever increasing taxes to Rome, while receiving fewer and fewer benefits from those taxes, at the same time they had more and more occupation by Roman guards.

Beneath the gold lay an apathy towards all those who looked at such a great display of wealth and power being built in their country while they were barely scraping by to put food on their tables.

But, it was dangerous to see beneath that incredible edifice of the temple. Jesus knew his rag tag band of followers had no chance against the greatest army the world had ever known. He knew there were plenty of people of faith, who would stand with

Herod, Pharisees and Sadducees, who even though Herod persecuted them as well, still benefited from the system and weren't going to put their own necks on the line to challenge it. He knew the danger of exposing what lies beneath great ostentatious displays of wealth and power. Jesus knew that future rebellions rising up against occupation and the great disparity of wealth and power would be violently quashed. But Jesus also knew that no temple, no building, no matter how great, could claim to own or domesticate God.

Author Debie Thomas writes:

“What the disciples see is an architectural marvel, yes. But it's also the biggest, boldest, and most unshakeable symbol of God's presence they're capable of imagining. .. In short, what takes the followers' breath away as they gaze at the temple is the religious certainty and permanence those glittering stones display to the world.

That's what Jesus's disciples see. But what does Jesus see? He sees ruins. Rubble. Destruction. Fragility, not permanence. Loss, not glory. Change, not stasis. Jesus sees all that must break and buckle and end before new life and new hope will emerge. He sees the necessity of death before the promise of resurrection.”¹

Jesus was talking to the disciples, but there are plenty of ways that we are not that different from them. We're not so different in our eagerness to put our trust in the newest, shiniest thing that will offer us some sense of protection and security. We are not so different in bargaining with ourselves that our safety and well-being, and even our comfort, is worth the trade of others suffering, especially if we don't have to see that suffering directly. We are not so different when we fall for fear mongering or sensationalism or chaos or fantastic displays of wealth and power. Just like humans in almost every time and place, we too have hoped we could contain God, cajole God, convince God to be on our side, and in lieu of that, that we could build up enough of our own power and wealth to make ourselves immune from the chaos of the world – the wars, the earthquakes, the corrupt governments, the natural disasters.

And Jesus tells the disciples to wake up; to disillusion themselves from the lies that if they can just rise up and overturn the current government, everything will be fine. Because they don't really want to change the system. They just want to be the ones at the top of it. Maybe they think they'd do things differently. Maybe they would. But Jesus is showing them that the whole system itself is wrong. Jesus is telling them that God is not containable, can't be domesticated, and God isn't the one causing our pain and suffering because we are doing that on our own by participating in systems

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2451-by-your-endurance>

that allow golden temples to be erected while people starve. Rather than putting our faith in institutions and governments and temples to save us, Jesus tells us that if we want to save our souls, we will prepare ourselves to face all the chaos of the world, learn to see beneath the shiny surface and be willing to testify to what we see. But he doesn't try to pretend it won't be dangerous, just that to keep our souls we have to do it, have to practice "seeing beneath" in spite of the danger. What does that mean though?

Debie Thomas writes,

"Do not be terrified," Jesus says, when the earth shakes, and nations make war, and imposters preach alluring gospels of fear, resentment, and hatred. Don't give in to despair. Don't capitalize on chaos. Don't neglect to bear witness. God is not where people often say God is. God doesn't fear-monger. God doesn't sensationalize. God doesn't thrive on human dread."

Thomas says, "For me, *this* is the great challenge of the Gospel. Not simply to bear the apocalypse, but to bear it *well*. To bear it with the courage, calm, and faith Jesus calls me to practice in this passage."²

To bear it well means to be willing to testify when we see powers and principalities causing suffering, even when it is dangerous for us. It means to have the strength to not be sucked in by promises that power or wealth will keep us safe. It means to accept that there will be pain in this life and to choose to endure. But, how do we endure? That's the question, isn't it? Jesus says, "*Don't be terrified,*" but the truth is — sometimes we are. When the world feels shaky, when systems crumble, when what we've trusted doesn't hold anymore, when we do become disillusioned — fear is right there. So how do we do what Jesus asks? How do we stay faithful in a world that feels like it's coming apart?

We endure by not turning away. By staying awake to both the suffering *and* the beauty around us. We endure by looking for resurrection — not just someday, but right here, in the small mercies that show up when things fall apart. We endure by being people who are trained to see beneath the surface, beneath the gold.

For example, most of us visit a grocery store every week and are surrounded by what can only be described as ostentatious displays of food - aisles and aisles of it. Food we know will be thrown away when it isn't bought in time. Food displayed in ways that the richest people of Jesus' time could have never imagined. Food from far away

² <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2451-by-your-endurance>

countries. Food that is out of season. Food that has enough chemicals to never go bad. And that's just one store of many in a community.

I've worked at a food pantry for around two years, so I have already been aware that food insecurity is a real problem in our country. I've already seen how wrong it is that so many people are working and still not making enough money to afford enough food. It's wrong that so many people have no ability to grow or produce any of their own food. It's wrong that parents can't afford to feed their children because their wages are so low and childcare expenses are so high. It's wrong that most of us have no idea where most of our food comes from or who grows or makes it. It's wrong that needing help is seen as a sign of laziness or personal moral failing, when it so rarely is.

But the recent fight over SNAP benefits during the government shutdown taught me some other things. For the first time, I heard the statistic that for every one meal the food pantries in our country provide, SNAP is covering 9 more. That means that no matter what the food pantries do, no matter how much greater the community donations get, they have virtually no chance of closing that gap.

Meanwhile, we are constantly surrounded on TV or in the media by evidence of the obscene wealth of certain members of our society: celebrities and athletic team owners and politicians and CEO's. That should have us asking questions - questions about disparity of wealth as well as how we value different kinds of work and people in our society. Questions about how we can help and donate, but also questions about why its like this, what policies have created this system and what can we change about it.

That's the kind of thing we should be working to see beneath instead of spending our time mesmerized and hoping someday we too will have all of that. Our own communities should be able to care for our neighbors when they are in need, but more and more that isn't possible. We should see it for what it is – a broken system - and be willing to call it that and do something about it.

And I'm not saying that's easy. It can quickly become overwhelming. Food insecurity is but one of the many, many ways we should be able to see beneath the shiny distractions. In fact, when we start to practice seeing beneath enough, it can feel like it is the beginning of the apocalypse.

But perhaps that's because we are. We live in an apocalypse – the signs Jesus shares – wars and earthquakes, famines and plagues - are happening now and they always have been. The earth has always been ending in a way. But, apocalypse is not just an ending. It is also “an unveiling. A disclosure of something secret and hidden. To experience an apocalypse is to experience fresh sight. Honest disclosure. Accurate

revelation. It is to apprehend reality as we've never apprehended it before." Apocalypse wakes us up and shakes up our illusions that somehow we can hold it all together if we just try harder.

How? First, we help each other as much as we can. Just here at Covenant, the amount of food and money that has come in in the past couple of weeks for the food pantry shows considerable generosity. I know folks who aren't receiving a paycheck right now who are still making sure they set aside anything they can to help others.

Second, we don't stay silent or turn away from the suffering but testify to what we see. We speak up and out to the powerful. We ask questions. We keep testifying to what we see beneath.

Third, we have to work to disillusion ourselves from the idea that any of us can ever have "enough" to avoid the pain and suffering of this world. We have to see through the systems which tells us it can protect us. We have to stop believing the shiniest, glitteriest, newest thing will fix things and instead choose to accept that we live in a world that is always ending and always beginning and no amount of money or power will change that.

Because when the temple falls — and it always does, whatever our "temples" might be — God doesn't disappear in the rubble. God's never been contained by walls or wealth or systems of power. God's right there in the dust and the mess, building something new out of what's been broken.

That's the promise Jesus gives us. When everything else shakes, God doesn't. When we lose our footing, God holds steady. When the world feels like it's ending, God is already planting seeds of beginning.

So, we endure. Endurance, the way Jesus talks about it, isn't about just toughing it out or pretending everything's fine. It's not a passive state either, just waiting for things to change. It's about committing to the long and difficult, often uphill work of justice. It's about showing up for each other. It's about hope — not the easy kind that comes when everything's going well, but the gritty, stubborn kind that holds on even when it doesn't make sense to. It's about testifying to the truth, even if it costs us.

That's who we are called to be - the ones who keep showing up; who keep helping each other; who keep putting our trust in God alone. We keep loving, fiercely and faithfully, until love is all that's left standing. We endure — not because we're unshakable, but because God's love is. We endure because that is how we gain, how we keep, our souls. Amen.

