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## Jesus Will Give Us the Words

 October 23, 2022

“I will rejoice in Jerusalem and delight in my people.”<sup>[1]</sup>

By Cynthia Briggs Kittredge

We live in a world with very short news cycles, if there are any at all. I remember when at 7 every evening our family tuned into Dan Rather, and we found out what had happened during the day.

Today each of us has “news” at our fingertips day and night. We are hooked up to a steady drip or to a deluge of fires, floods, earthquakes, assassinations, and massacres. Partisan conflict rages, rhetoric ratcheted to peak shrillness.

It’s hard to decide to what to give our attention. Is this tragedy the big one? Is this the horrific event that matters more than any other? I run into this dilemma at the seminary when, every Monday morning, in light of the news, I have to decide whether to make a statement to the community — to write a message of pastoral comfort and theological reflection.

How big does the storm have to be? How many have to die? How close in miles? How many killed in the violence to justify such a message of comfort?

My friend Andrew Nunn is the dean of Southwark Cathedral in the city of London. At times of civic distress, they put out a shrine with candles and invite the neighbors to pray. This was important after the London Bridge bombing in 2017 next door to the cathedral.

The dean has to decide — which disasters? Which crimes merit special observance?

There are some in our world who exploit this fear about things falling apart and intensify the sense of being all the time on the brink of a worse disaster: social media companies, journalists, those who sell underground bunkers to the super rich.

But for many of us, this sense of doom creeps up, seeps in. It germinates until we are infected with cynicism.

Those institutions and belief systems in which we used to put our trust have become too weak to help us: the United States Constitution, the nuclear family, the Christian Church.

We become numb or we make ourselves numb with alcohol or overwork.

Whatever project we face or day that lies ahead really doesn't matter in the face of general collapse. We don't even realize that chronic meaninglessness has taken us over. We have lost touch with God's vision and we do not give voice to our faith.

In the city of Jerusalem, people in the crowd around Jesus, people of faith, are admiring the temple. They appreciate the fine materials, its lovely façade.

The temple in Jerusalem wasn't just a building; it was the symbol — of the relationship of God with the people of Israel, the locus of ritual, practices, holidays, and of meaning. That's why it was large and beautiful — because it was the source of meaningfulness and security and belonging. It inspired affection: "How lovely is thy dwelling place, oh Lord of hosts to me; my thirsty soul desires and longs, within thy courts to be."<sup>[2]</sup>

In contemporary terms, you could say the temple was "Instagramable." But more than that, it was architectural embodiment of divine presence and power. Our buildings are that too: the World Trade Center, London Bridge, the Texas Capitol. Not just any building. An institution that is indestructible, that you can trust to live on after you, just as it had before you.

Jesus knew that tensions were rising in Jerusalem; he knew that his life was at stake; he knew that conflict with the Romans would not go well for the people. “The days will come,” he says, “when not one stone will remain upon the other — all will be thrown down.”[3]

Christians who read Luke’s gospel knew that what Jesus had said was true. Their people had undergone the worst loss imaginable, the fall of Jerusalem and the utter obliteration of the temple, the lovely dwelling place of God. This loss was the undoing of the world, creation running in reverse, a military defeat that was a theological catastrophe. There was not a doubt that the loss of the temple was the *big one*.

Jesus says there will be time before the end comes, when you will have the opportunity to testify to your faith, to proclaim the good news of God.

Wow! Right! What to say? What could they possibly say? So worn out, so battle weary, so afraid. “I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.”[4]

When we read Holy Scripture, when we read, mark, learn, and over the years inwardly digest it, it opens our minds and kindles our imagination. The story of Scripture expands our sight, expands our hearts, beyond the relentless new cycles of the present day.

In Scripture we see horrific desolation and defeat, once in the conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, that sent the people into exile beyond their land, a displacement that was equivalent to death. We see Jesus predict the collapse again, of the temple they knew and loved.

And at each of these times of despair, Scripture remembers the icon of deliverance; Exodus from Egypt on a dry path through the Red Sea.

In Scripture the news cycle is centuries long, and within it, we read of God’s faithfulness and our faithfulness in return. At these times of despair, we see in Scripture — God is faithful. God keeps promises God makes.

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry unto her that her iniquity is pardoned, and she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.”[5]

Each time the world collapsed, God found a way, God made a way to heal and to save.

God delivers the people. “Surely it is God who saves me. I will trust in him and not be afraid.”

As our world gets scarier and scarier, God who is present in Holy Scripture invites, encourages, and demands our faithfulness.

Don't be numb! Don't be depressed! Shake off the fear that incapacitates you!

God says, keep paying attention, don't give up, keep forgiving, keep giving to widow and orphan, and keep caring for the stranger. Keep the faith.

Resist those who exploit fear and profit from despair. God loves, God saves, even when the temple is gone. Faith is indestructible.

Even now, even now, God is freeing us from slavery. God is bringing us home from exile.

God is bringing Jesus up from the cold, dark tomb. Even now God remaking the world, recreating the world undone.

“For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth.”

“I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as its delight.”

In this frightening moment, now is the time for us to give voice to our faith. Even if we are shy; even if we have never done it before; even if we don't know the words. See it in Scripture; know it in your siblings and friends in Christ.

Who we are matters. What we do matters. The day that lies ahead matters. God is faithful. Time to speak. Jesus says, “I will give you the words.”

*The Very Rev. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge is dean and president and professor of New Testament at Seminary of the Southwest, Austin, Texas.*

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[1] Isaiah 65:19

[2] Hymn 517

[3] Luke 21:6

[4] Luke 21:14

[5] Isaiah 40:1

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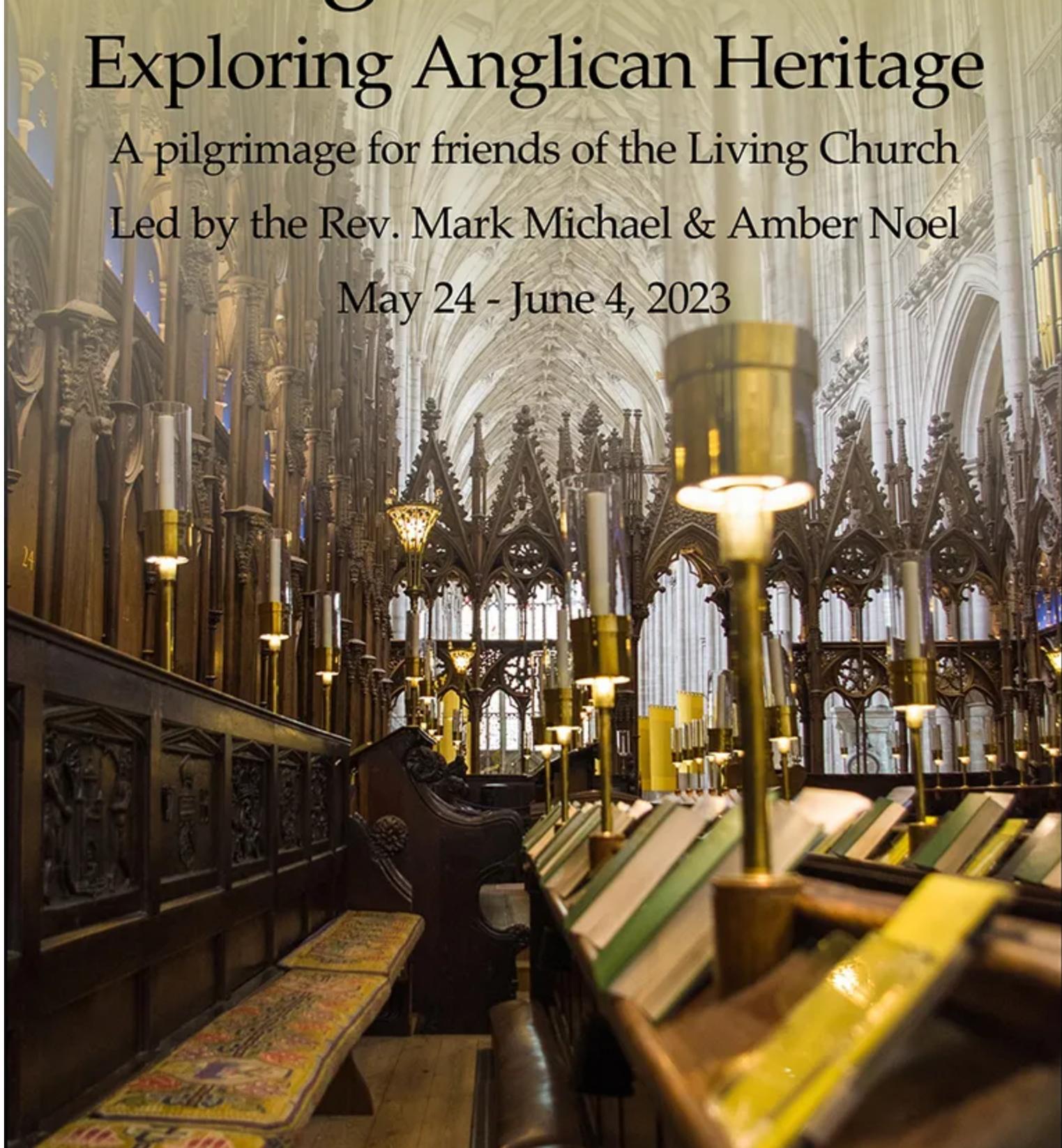
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