

Walls and Hope and the Abraham Mosque February 9, 2014
By Wayne J. Schneider - Soli Deo Gloria

Walls and hope and the Abraham Mosque St. Luke 21:5-8

I recently read that there is literally a psychological disorder called "Jerusalem syndrome." in which people returning from visiting the Holy Land exhibit irrational and obsessive religious fervor.

If you were to visit the Holy Land be sure to see the Abraham Mosque, otherwise known as the tomb of the Patriarchs, otherwise known as that piece of ground in Hebron referred to in Genesis as the land Abraham bought and where he, Sarah, Leah, Rebecca and Jacob are all buried.

To visit this particular holy site, if you can get through the Israeli checkpoints and metal detectors and soldiers with AK-47s, you will enter a building with 6-foot-thick walls made from stones that are at least 3 feet tall and sometimes reach a length of 24 feet.

Those huge walls around the tomb of Abraham, Sarah and the other ancestors of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths, were put in place a few decades before the birth of Christ, by the Jewish ruler Herod the Great (although let's be honest ... most likely they were built by slaves under Herod's rule).

Then when the Byzantine Empire ruled the area they built a Christian Basilica on the site. Then that was destroyed by the Persian Empire and *they* built a Mosque on the site.

Then, when the Christian Crusaders conquered the land, they built a Crusader church on the site and then forbid the Muslims to enter.

Then years later the Muslims conquered again and they made the Crusader church back into a Mosque, and then forbid the Jews from entering. And now, today, the largely Jewish state of Israel has this so-called holy site surrounded by soldiers holding AK 47s.

So I find it hard not to be cynical about that place. About how it is such a symbol of the worst of humanity and religion. And it all makes me wonder in what do we place our hope?

Do we try and claim God as our own and nervously fix in time and space the symbols of God's faithfulness? And when we do that, does it just seem like more of an act of our

own faithlessness than anything else? As though if we encounter God in one place 'We have to ensure that that place is protected because, well, what if God doesn't show up again? Do we perhaps end up placing more hope and trust in a place or an institution than in God? But God just doesn't seem to give a fig about our little efforts to domesticate God to our own agendas.

Here's why I mention this: those outrageously large stones I described at the beginning? The one's Herod built? Same stones as the ones Herod used to make up the temple Jesus and his disciples were talking about in our Gospel text for today. There is still one section of that temple wall from Jesus' day that stands today.

You might have heard it referred to as the Wailing Wall. And indeed there is much to wail about. The last few years have seen such violence in the land called Holy. There is war there ... or maybe just rumors of war. But given all of this let's listen again to today's reading.

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, *"Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!"* 2Then Jesus asked him, *"Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."*

5Then Jesus began to say to them, *"Beware that no one leads you astray. 6 Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. 7 When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. 8For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines."*

Jesus could have been talking about February 2014.

Jesus looks at his disciples and knowing how impressed they are with the permanence and hope of the temple, he takes a stickpin to the bubble they are living in, and he pops it. He's just kind of like that sometimes, isn't he?

So this week I started to wonder what my own bubble might be ... what large **stones** am I so reliant upon still standing in my own life? What do I treat as eternal that is not? What must stand in order for me to still place my hope in God ... maybe the health and safety of my family, or the longevity of my denomination, or the economy, or the fact that I can walk down the road without fear of missile attacks.

As his disciples gaze upon the temporary thing in which they place their hope, Jesus doesn't say that having a temple is wrong, he totally hung out there, he just said that the temple still standing is not the ultimate sign that God is faithful.

There's nothing wrong with wanting my family to be healthy or for this congregation to thrive or my denomination to still be around or to be safe on my own streets. But these things are not eternal. These things cannot love me the way God can love me.

Jesus was right of course ... the temple his disciples were so impressed with actually was destroyed in 70 AD but it wasn't God who destroyed it. It was Rome. And Jesus was right there will be wars and rumors of wars. There will be destruction, false prophets, and famine; there will be the Left Behind series of books, and the decline and fall of the Hostess Twinkie. All of this will happen Jesus says and very little of this will have any thing to do with God.

Because God doesn't cause it. God just bears it. God bears all of our sin and our suffering. That's what the cross was about: A God who became flesh and took all of our violence and hatred and all of our wall building sins into his very own body. The flesh of God made flesh bore all of it on the cross so that it's finished.

There is nothing to be had through the walls and violence that we are so addicted to, because God upturned our systems of violence and power-over as a blameless victim, taking it all into God's crucified body.

So that God no longer meets us in the big shiny temple of a ruling political or religious power, but in that very body of Christ. In all ways of speaking of the body of Christ . . . in Jesus' own flesh, in the Eucharist and in the church. This is a servant God who disarms the violence of humanity and offers God's own blessings and grace in exchange. The death and resurrection of Jesus is nothing less than the everlasting and irrevocable yes of God.

Jesus in this text is saying to his disciples that the temple in which they place their hope will be torn down ... but that doesn't mean hope itself will be torn down, because Jesus is the new temple and we tried to do it to him too but he rose again, and with him, our hope.

It is God and not symbols of God that lives. And it is God and not institutions related to God that lives, and it is God and not places where we experience God that lives.

So, as the writer of Hebrews said, *Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.* And he who has promised is faithful in a way that walls and empire and efforts to domesticate God and placing our trust in ourselves can never be. So that finally there is only one thing worthy of our trust, and that will never be torn down and it is simply not a wall or empire we might build to

protect us, and it is certainly not a tradition or place associated with Abraham. But brothers and sisters it is the God of Abraham. Alleluia. Amen.