Famines, plagues and persecutions: Well, that is a jolly gospel lesson we get today. Let me remind you I don’t pick the biblical lessons we hear on Sundays. If I did, you might not hear this passage for another 20 years.

So, who picks these? A committee long ago, with representatives of many denominations, put together what is called the “Revised Common Lectionary” for us to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest. If you are interested in knowing more about the lectionary, ask me later.

So, let’s tackle this gospel lesson and see what we can get out of it.

First, many biblical scholars will tell you that they doubt Jesus said these exact words. The passage appears to reflect historical events that occurred about 40 years after the life of Jesus, namely the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and the gruesome persecution of both Christians and Jews by the Romans.

Maybe the biblical scholars are right about this being a later addition to the Gospel of Luke, and maybe not. That need not concern us today.

What is clear is this passage, and many others like it, is that Jesus confronted corruption in the Temple. All four of the gospels are filled with accounts of his challenging the institutional religion of his time.

He pointed out, over and over, that the institutional religion was cynically exploiting people by forcing them to follow pious rules and taking their money at the Temple. This conflict ultimately led to Jesus’s death on the Cross.

The irony this morning of my preaching on this story, of course, is I stand in this pulpit representing institutional religion.

Let’s be up front and honest about it: There is plenty of reason to be suspicious of institutional religion. If you are suspicious of institutional religion, I can hardly disagree.

One can easily argue that institutional religion has done more harm than good in this world, and the list of harm just by Christianity alone is long:

The pogroms that led to the slaughter of millions of Jews; the Crusades against Muslims, and the inquisitions against fellow Christians leading to the murder of more millions.

More widely, institutional religion has defended slavery, given cover for child molesters, and encouraged all manner of hatred based on tribe, race, gender and sexual orientation.
And let me point out, all of these sins – and these are sins – have infected not just Christianity, but also Judaism, Islam and Hinduism.

It is, therefore, fair to ask the question: Should the temple of institutional religion come down? Or is there another, healthier way to look at religious institutions, in general and specifically at our own?

Start with the basics of religion itself.

Religion, at its best, gives us a structure for understanding God and creation, and our place in it. Religion gives us a common language for exploring the deepest mysteries of existence. And at its best, religion gives us structure for how we care for each other and the world around us, and how we live ethically in community.

None of this should be ever taken for granted.

Our religious institutions are only as good as the care we give them, and the ethical values with which we imbue them.

We do this through our participation – starting with being here in worship regularly – and not just going through the motions.

It truly matters that you are here. Your prayers, your participation, your creativity, your insights, your giving, matter more than you can imagine.

The world is hungry for what we offer here – if only we let the rest of the world know we are here. And that takes us – all of us – inviting new people here, one-by-one.

Last weekend, many of us were at our annual diocesan convention, and we heard Mary Parmer, the founder of a nation-wide Episcopal Church ministry called “Invite-Welcome-Connect.” She asked us to take a hard look at how we invite new people here, how we welcome them, and how we connect new people into our community of faith.

In the coming weeks, I propose to launch a congregation-wide conversation and take on these hard questions — and then work on what we learn. It is time to grow Trinity Cathedral once again, and I invite all of us to be a part of this effort.

I bring us back to the gospel lesson this morning because it connects here.

For Jesus, he was doing much more than simply calling-out the obvious hypocrisy of a religious institution. All the prophets had done that. Rather, Jesus’s primary concern was not with reforming the Temple for its own sake, but with reforming ourselves from within.

He knew that this must be the purpose of any religious institution – to give us a place where we can feel God’s presence within ourselves, and to be reformed and transformed by the holy within us, and then reform and transform the world around us. The religious institution that does this deserves to thrive.

Yet Jesus also knew that to challenge the religious authorities of his time was to invite disaster upon himself, and his followers. He knew what was coming.
So, Jesus tells his followers — and us — to have courage. Buck up and get on with building God’s kingdom, and do the hard work reforming and transforming ourselves and our institutions.

There will be difficult moments, and setbacks, but the Holy Spirit is always with us, showing us the way forward, and ultimately bringing us new life.

“Not a hair of your head will perish,” Jesus says. “By your endurance you will gain your souls.” AMEN