

November 17, 2024

Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 13:1-8 (NRSV)

pg. 50, NT Pew Bible

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.”

³When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴“Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” ⁵Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁶Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. ⁷When 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. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word...

SIGN, SIGN, EVERYWHERE A SIGN

Julie Craig, a Presbyterian Pastor and blogger, offers a few thoughts to get us started this morning. She remembers that as a child she didn’t want Jesus to come back. She wanted her own life, and no amount of fire and brimstone from the pulpits of her childhood, no promises of bejeweled crowns to wear or walking the streets of gold so pure they will seem like they are glass, or mansions just over the hilltop, or of all eternity to spend with Jesus could keep her from wanting to see how her earthly life would turn out. She writes: “An eleven or twelve-year-old girl doesn’t want Jesus to come back before she gets the chance to go to high school, or drive a car, or kiss a boy, or grow up. So, when the preachers of my childhood would loudly, insistently, and fervently prayed “Come quickly, Lord!” I, ever the rebel, would be sitting in my pew, or kneeling at the front altar railing, quietly but just as fervently praying, “Not just yet, Lord. Not just yet.”

The apocalyptic sayings of Jesus are some of his most difficult teachings. In our post-modern, scientific, technological age, we’re not sure what to do with them or how to appropriate them into our life of discipleship and into our understanding of a loving and merciful God. Who really likes to think about such things—cataclysmic events, fire and smoke, war, famine, plague, earthquakes, super storms, all kinds of natural or man-made catastrophes. But, in all our efforts to figure things out, to make audacious predictions that this must be the end of days because this is going on and that is happening, is missing the point inherent in Jesus’ words. It

seems to me that Jesus isn't attempting to distract us from the present moment by making bold predictions about the end times, but rather directing us to look more closely at current events and consider that we are called to be prepared for all times.

When I think about what has happened in my own lifetime, I remember the evening news stories as the war in Vietnam was winding down. I remember the war between the United Kingdom and Argentina over the Falkland Islands, the bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, violence in the streets and bombings by the IRA in Northern Ireland, racial and religious conflicts in Sarajevo and the Balkans, and of course, the seemingly endless fighting in the Middle East. I'm familiar with the genocides in Rwanda and Darfur and flooding and starvation in places like Bangladesh and sub-Saharan Africa. We've all encountered the news of diseases like AIDS, Ebola, swine and avian forms of influenza, the threat of super-viruses and antibiotic-resistant infections which have changed our habits of hygiene. The COVID pandemic has affected all of us in many ways. It's enough to leave us anxious and afraid. And that is exactly why I think Jesus was trying to direct our attention by sharing his words in the 13th chapter of Mark. To give us hope and to help us to not allow fear to overwhelm us and to direct our energies to live faithfully amidst the realities in which we find ourselves. So, let's set the scene.

The text begins with an exclamation. *What large stones and what large buildings!* The country fellows from Galilee who were Jesus' disciples are awed, on this first trip to Jerusalem. Jesus pushes back against that awe: *All of these buildings will fall*, he tells them, and then he speaks about wars and rumors of wars, calling it all the *beginning of the birth pangs*. Well, who isn't awed by buildings? The icons of most cities are their buildings: the Eiffel tower is Paris; Big Ben is London; the Capital Building is Washington D.C.; the Brandenburg Gate is Berlin. We often pick travel destinations, in part, for the buildings we want to see. I'll never forget my first and only visit to New York City, this seldom-travelled Tennessee boy standing there wide-eyed and slack-jawed, gazing up at the skyscrapers in amazement and wonder.

The Temple truly was one of the wonders of the ancient world and the disciples were justifiable in their awe walking in its outer courts. This Second Temple, which had been renovated by Herod the Great during Jesus' lifetime, sat on a leveled-out mountaintop that Solomon had built up with stone to make room for the first great Temple destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC. Herod built great walls surrounding this area and, in Jesus' day, they enclosed an area of about thirty-six acres, in which one could fit seven high school football complexes with quarter mile tracks surrounding them laid out side by side. According to the 1st century Jewish historian, Josephus, the Jerusalem temple of Jesus's day was indeed an awe-inspiring wonder. The temple's retaining walls were composed of stones forty feet long. Herod reportedly used so much gold to cover the outside walls that anyone who gazed at them in bright sunlight risked blinding themselves. All that remains today from Jesus' time is what is

now called The Wailing Wall. For historical comparison, the Temple was actually larger than the Coliseum in Rome, which ironically was built in 70 A.D., the same year the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed.

Mark's audience encounters this episode after the Temple had been destroyed by Roman armies just a generation after Jesus had said these words. Josephus, who was present at the destruction of the Temple and sack of Jerusalem, gives us a full account of what happened there. The Jewish revolt against Rome began in 66 A.D. The zealots were able to push the Roman cohorts out of the city and set up their own government. At first, things went well. The Romans were not yet ready for a full-blown siege of the city. However, when Rome was finally able to mobilize the full force of its legions, the situation for the rebels quickly became dire. Eventually, the Romans laid siege to the city, breaking through its walls with their technologically developed siege engines and the sheer number of soldiers and auxiliaries. The Roman soldiers were so frustrated by the tenacious defenders of the Temple that, when they finally gained the upper hand, the troops ferociously killed everyone, raping and pillaging, much to the embarrassment of Titus, the commanding general. Josephus records that Titus tried to restrain the slaughter and the burning of the Temple, but he arrived too late to stop the atrocities committed there. When Titus was offered the traditional wreath of victory by the Roman Senate, he reportedly refused it and said, "There is no glory in destroying a people whose God has forsaken them."

The disciples ask Jesus: "Lord, will this be the time? Are these the signs that all these things are about to be accomplished?" Jesus' answer begins by warning us not to be led astray by needless speculation. "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray." In other words, be careful of anyone who claims to have the answers to these questions. If anyone is peddling religious-sounding explanations for what is going on and what it all means, be very careful that you are not being sold a bill of goods. Times of catastrophe and hardship always sees the rise of people who claim to be able to make sense of it all and who set themselves up as those who can help us to safely navigate the apocalyptic horrors and find our way through to the heavenly realm.

Jesus does not deny that there may be some chronological relationship between violent world events and the hope of what is to come, but he does make it clear that it is not a simple case of cause and effect, or of God pulling the strings and setting the wheels in motion. "When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs."

Jesus is not telling us to ignore such things, or to pretend they don't matter. But he is telling us to avoid trying to interpret them as signs of God's activity. This doesn't mean that God isn't doing anything, either. Jesus does say that the chaos is related to what God is doing — it is the beginning of the birth pangs — but that doesn't mean that God is orchestrating it. For example, we don't accuse a baby of orchestrating the labour pains of the mother. But something must give if the new is to emerge, and sometimes, like childbirth itself, it is often traumatic. What God is bringing to birth has nothing to do with apocalyptic violence and chaos. Human culture, being what it is, however, may well be reacting to God's actions, by plunging itself into chaos. Jesus reminds us to be careful not to get carried away by such interpretations. Don't start thinking that everything is a sign, and that God's actions can now be reliably predicted by reading the signs into world events. God remains free and will not be bound by our simplistic theories of cause and effect. Contrary to what some folks seem to believe, we cannot force God to bring about the kingdom by fanning the fires of global conflict into apocalyptic proportions. God might be bringing something new to birth from the midst of the current chaos, and God might not. Don't be led astray by simple tick-off-the-checklist doomsday theories.

Here is my paraphrase of what Jesus might say to us today: "Take a chill pill. Everyone needs to relax. Quite a few terrible things happen in life. I know it's scary, but you should see things as the opportunity to serve others. Don't be led astray by those who offer easy and simplistic answers and then blame other people for our problems. Pull together in the hard times; that's how you get through. I'll be with you too, and I will show you the way. Things will be difficult, but stick together and remember what is important in life – to love one another."

By the time Mark's Gospel was written, an entire generation had passed. Even though the eyewitnesses were long gone, Christ's promised return remained an important part of early Christian faith — a promise of redemption to a people living under an oppressive government — the promised return of the Savior to make things right again. Something each generation has done ever since, interpreting the events around them and looking at this promise through its own lens, even as we do in our own time. It is ultimately about hope.

Brazilian theologian and philosopher Rubem Alvez defines hope in this way:

"[Hope] is the pre-sentiment that imagination is more real, and reality less real than it looks. It is the suspicion that the overwhelming brutality of facts that oppress us and repress us is not the last word. It is the notion that reality is more complex than the realists want us to believe. That the frontiers of the possible are not determined by the limits of the actual. And that in a miraculous and unexpected way, life is preparing the creative events which will open the way to freedom and to resurrection. But, the two, suffering and hope, must live from each other. Suffering

without hope produces resentment and despair. But hope without suffering creates illusions, naiveté, and drunkenness.”

We are called to live by the love of what we will never see. This is the secret of discipline and patience. It is a refusal to let our creative act be dissolved away by our own need for immediate sense experience. And it's a stubborn commitment to the future of our grandchildren. Such disciplined love is what has given saints, revolutionaries, and martyrs the courage to die for the future they envisage. They make their own bodies the seed of their own highest hopes.

The book of Hebrews sums it up this way: “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the final day approaching.” That’s it. That’s the key. Hold fast to the faith and hope you have found in Jesus. Stir one another up to greater and greater love and more and more ways to put it into action. Gather often as a community of faith and compassion, support and encourage one another. The more the world plunges into chaos and violence, the more we will need one another. Too simple? Perhaps, but then so is the birth of a baby and, as Mary found, it is in such little signs of life being born where there was only barrenness and dead hopes, that the real action of God is seen.

“Life Goes On” (Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*, 1953)

During these turbulent times we must remind ourselves repeatedly that life goes on.

This we are apt to forget.

The wisdom of life transcends our wisdoms;

the purpose of life outlasts our purposes;

the process of life cushions our processes.

The mass attack of disillusion and despair, distilled out of the collapse of hope, has so invaded our thoughts that what we know to be true and valid seems unreal and ephemeral.

There seems to be little energy left for aught but futility.

This is the great deception.

By it whole peoples have gone down to oblivion without the will to affirm the great and permanent strength of the clean and the commonplace.

Let us not be deceived.

It is just as important as ever to attend to the little graces by which the dignity of our lives is maintained and sustained.

Birds still sing; the stars continue to cast their gentle gleam over the desolation of the battlefields, and the heart is still inspired by the kind word and the gracious deed.

There is no need to fear evil.

There is every need to understand what it does, how it operates in the world, what it draws upon to sustain itself.

We must not shrink from the knowledge of the evilness of evil.

Over and over, we must know that the real target of evil is not destruction of the body, the reduction to rubble of cities; the real target of evil is to corrupt the spirit of [humanity] and to give his soul the contagion of inner disintegration.

When this happens, there is nothing left, the very citadel of man is captured and laid waste.

Therefore, the evil in the world around us must not be allowed to move from without to within.

This would be to be overcome by evil.

To drink in the beauty that is within reach, to clothe one's life with simple deeds of kindness, to keep alive a sensitiveness to the movement of the spirit of God in the quietness of the human heart and in the workings of the human mind—this is as always the ultimate answer to the great deception.

Benediction—

Go out in peace, for the Lord has heard your prayers.

Do not allow anyone to lead you astray
but hold fast to the hope you have claimed.

Continue to meet together,
encouraging and provoking one another
to put love into action.

And may God be your rock of strength;
May Christ Jesus usher you into the presence of God;
and may the Holy Spirit write the laws of life on your hearts.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. **Amen.**