

OSLC Sermon – November 18, 2018
Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13:1-8

Grace to you and peace...

Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.

Such was Jesus' response to the disciple who marveled at the magnificent structure that was the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.

What if it's true?

Let me be clear. It *is* the case that the Temple known by Jesus and his disciples was in fact destroyed in 70CE – a violent response to put down the Jewish revolt against their Roman oppressors. Certainly the Gospel of Mark was written a generation or so after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Some speculate that this reference to the destruction of the Temple indicates that Mark was writing after that event had already taken place. In any case, the remarkable structure really was a sight to behold.

“According to the 1st century historian, Josephus, the Jerusalem temple of Jesus' day was an awe-inspiring wonder. Newly reconstructed by Herod the Great, the temple's retaining walls were composed of stones forty feet long. The temple itself 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.” (Debie Thomas, Journey with Jesus.net, November 11, 2018)

Jesus said, “Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” It is and was a true statement. It’s been true for centuries. On the site of the Second Jewish Temple, the Muslim “Dome of the Rock” stands as another ancient monument to another world religion, and has since 691 CE.

I wonder why it is that a true statement made by Jesus two thousand years ago still causes fear and trembling in our hearts. Why do Jesus’ words sound so ominous, so threatening, even now?

When I traveled to the Holy Land (more than a year ago now) we saw stunningly beautiful monument after beautiful monument, most of them also built on the remains of previously stunning monuments constructed to recognize, honor, and preserve sites where significant or holy events in the life of Jesus were thought to have occurred. When you can see the layers of architectural craftsmanship giving witness to centuries gone by, it’s hard to deny the transitory, fleeting, even fragile nature of great human endeavors.

It’s more difficult here in our own country. Our truly grand structures are new, made with the finest materials, with technical knowledge about how they will withstand the forces of nature, giving witness to the great power of human endeavor and ingenuity. Even a really old structure in this land may be only a couple of hundred years old. It’s easier to deny the reality of how temporary our monuments, our institutions, and our lives truly are.

Unless you are among those who live on the edges of our prosperous economic systems. For those with fewer means, the fragility of existence is a lot closer. Think of the tornado that blew through North Minneapolis several years ago. The already vulnerable houses were the ones that were hardest hit; those who most needed low cost housing were the first to be displaced. The current proliferation of bank monuments – I mean buildings – on nearly every corner maybe reassuring to those of us who have enough money to put some away, but there are a multitude of folks for whom a checking account is beyond reach.

Some measure of wealth gives the illusion of stability and security; of independence and self-sufficiency. It troubles us when Jesus' words imply that our structures and systems are not as enduring as we believe them to be. Because it was not only the destruction of the majestic temple that Jesus anticipated. It was the entire religious system and hierarchy of power, built upon the sweat and contributions of the most vulnerable; that Jesus said would not remain. The faith of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel, a faith that still endures, had been manipulated into a system that endowed the powerful with wealth and influence, but took advantage of the poor. Jesus, looking from the Mount of Olives across to the Temple, was making a commentary on the systems of oppression that are abhorrent to God. Jesus is pointing to the overturning of the powers of this world, and it sounds rather scary.

In Luke's gospel Mary's song of liberation sounds filled with beauty and hope. Perhaps it's because the language is poetic in tone, but each Advent season we find ourselves longing for the future that Mary proclaims:

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant...for the Mighty One has done great things for me...God’s mercy is for those who fear him. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty...”

With Mary we long for the day when justice will reign and all people will be gathered to feast on God’s holy mountain.

But how do we suppose that transformation is going to happen? Do we think the powerful will give up without a fight? That the 1% will suddenly come to realize the systems they constructed are unjust and biased against the poor?

Even electing the right candidates is not sufficient to save us from ourselves.

We might ask, as Jesus’ disciples did, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” Jesus answers with what has been called Mark’s “little apocalypse”:

Beware that no one leads you astray. When you hear of wars and rumors 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.

We tend to think of apocalyptic scripture as “predicting the future,” but it is actually the case that such imagery is intended to speak to what is happening “now,” and to offer a word of hope for those in the midst of suffering.

Apocalyptic speech today might include the fires raging in California, making no distinction between the fortunes of the wealthy or those in poverty; or it might speak of rising sea levels and unusual weather events resulting in both floods and droughts; it might speak of presumed “democratic” elections so distorted that the votes of many are suppressed, and even the largest number of votes is no guarantee of victory.

In the midst of it all, Jesus reminds us, “do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come;” “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” So surrounded by scary images and threatening events that we nearly miss it, Jesus points to the One who gives life to the world. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs. There is hope, and promise, and more than you can imagine, coming into being from the hand of God. Do not be led astray. Do not follow after false leaders. There is only One who endures, who holds the future for all creation.

We tend to long for stability and security. We like to have tangible signs of what we believe to be important, monuments to that which will truly last. But God’s very name is that of change: “Ego emi” is generally translated as “I Am” but it also means, “I will be who I will be.” God is not impressed with our monuments and institutions. God’s goal is the ongoing renewal of life and the thriving of all that God has made, and God will not be stopped.

In Bible study this week we pondered the question of our role in God’s continuous new birth. If wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines, and more are to be expected as making way for transformation, what are we to do? Mike Troutman, freshly back from his mother’s death and burial, offered, “Perhaps we are to be midwives of peace.”

What a glorious description of what it means to be Christ's church! If God is about the business of bringing new life, what better way to spend our lives than as midwives of God's reign – helping, encouraging, tending, and caring for the world as it is engaged in dying and being reborn. Midwives of peace.

Our epistle reading from Hebrews seems to say as much. Having been assured of God's grace and mercy in the death and resurrection of Christ, the writer urges us,

“²³ Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” This is what it means for us to be midwives of peace, grounded in this portion of the Body of Christ. This is the community we are supporting and sustaining with our financial commitments for the year to come.

Whether the end we see approaching is the end of our own life, the end of a relationship, the end of an institution, the end of a nation or even the end of the world, our role is the same. We are called to put our trust in the only thing that endures – the never ending love of God, and to live together in hope.

Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down. These are just the beginning of the birth pangs...for the world is about to turn. Amen.