



“Impermanence”
Scripture – Mark 13:1-8
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, November 18, 2018

The very first line of the Gospel of Mark reads like this: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Who remembers what the word “gospel” means? [Good news]. Mark says this is the *good news!*” And somehow, part of the good news according to Jesus, is: “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down. And there will be wars and rumors of wars, and there will be earthquakes and famines.” If this is the good news, I’d like to take a pass on the bad news.

Herod the Great ruled Judea on behalf of the Romans for more than three decades. He died a year or two after Jesus was born. Remember the story of the Magi following a star to the birthplace of Jesus? It was Herod the Great who told them to check in with him after they locate Jesus to let him know where the babe can be found. However, the Magi were not bumpkins. They knew Herod’s reputation for ruthlessness, and figured he was scheming something ugly, so they slipped out of Bethlehem and headed home by a different route to sidestep Herod. Furious that he had been duped, Herod ordered the massacre of all children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and younger.

In addition to developing a reputation for being merciless, Herod also chiseled out a reputation as a master builder. He directed the building of several imposing edifices that were specifically created to scream: “Incredible! Astonishing!”

In addition to building the fortress at Masada and the enormous port on the Mediterranean Sea named Caesarea Maritima, Herod totally rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem creating an architectural wonder designed to dazzle.

For centuries, the temple had stood atop Mount Moriah, and faithful Jews from near and far would embark on pilgrimages to this holy site. It was the ultimate “thin place” because the Hebrew people believed there was no other spot on earth where they could draw closer to God.

Today, Jerusalem is a thin place not only for Jews, but also for Christians and Muslims. Jews are drawn to the Western Wall, Muslims to the Dome of the Rock, and Christians to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

Our sanctuary is a thin place for many of us. We feel closer to God here than we do in an office building or sports arena or restaurant. A thin place is where the distance between heaven and earth seems much closer than most places, and where we feel nearer to God. Can you name a particular location that you have experienced as a thin place? (Isle of Iona, the Jordan River, the Grand Canyon, for many Roman Catholics it would be Saint Peter’s Basilica...)

A dozen years before the birth of Jesus, Herod began his massive project to completely reconstruct the temple. The peak of Mount Moriah was on its northern end, and it sloped southward. Herod built an enormous platform to flatten out the top of the mountain. It was an engineering marvel. Some of the stones used to construct the platform weighed in excess of 400 tons. Some of you think I'm exaggerating. Google it!

The platform was 900 feet by 1,500 feet – three football fields wide and five fields long. Several buildings were constructed atop the massive platform, but the primary structure, towering over everything, was the temple itself. The front of the temple measured 15 stories tall. It was built with hefty stones weighing more than a ton each. There were gold plates covering many of the stones and they reflected the rays of the sun with such intensity, that it was almost like looking at the sun itself. The temple evoked awe in everyone who saw it, but imagine how eye-popping it was for the disciples, most of whom had grown up in the countryside.

Today's passage indicates that Jesus and his disciples are standing outside of the soaring temple, and the disciples are gawking at the jaw-dropping spectacle. One of them finally utters, "Teacher, look at these enormous stones! Look at these grand buildings!"

The reply of Jesus? "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; it will all be thrown down!"

Our passage does not record the reply of the disciples, but it had to be on the order of: "Jesus, you've got to be kidding! This place was built to last. And it was built to the glory of God. Surely, God would not permit such a thing to happen."

Then, there is a gap in the narrative. Apparently, Jesus led the disciples down the mountain, across the Kidron valley, and up the adjacent mountain which is the Mount of Olives. This location provides a marvelous view of the temple about half a mile away.

Our text says that Jesus is sitting on the Mount of Olives when four of the disciples ask him privately about the destruction of the temple. "Tell us, when this will occur, and what will be the sign that it's about to happen?"

During the time of Jesus, many believed that the end of the world was imminent; the apocalypse was on its way. The disciples figured that if anyone could provide them with insight into the final days, it was their master. Jesus said, "There will be earthquakes and famines, and wars and rumors of wars. Nation will rise up against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will rise up leaders who will call on you to follow them, but be on guard because the only place they will lead you is astray."

Some scholars believe that Jesus is painting a picture of the end times for the disciples; providing them with insights that will help them determine when the end is near. However, I find myself lining up with those scholars who see it differently. I agree with the interpreter who says that Jesus "is not predicting the future, he's speaking about the precarious nature of the present."¹

The rebuilt temple in Jerusalem was a perfect example. It was constructed with enormous stones and appeared to most people that it could last forever. Yet, the temple did not remain standing for even 100 years. Only forty years after the death of Jesus, the Romans crushed a Jewish revolt and destroyed the temple. The victors shoved many of the massive stones over the sides of the platform, where many of them remain today.

The citizens of the Rome believed their empire would last forever. Leaders of the Third Reich figured they would have a good, solid run of a thousand years.

And, how often do we try to either shore things up or nail things down in an attempt to keep things permanent and established?

After Jesus drew a picture of turmoil and chaos and impermanence, he added, “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” Must some things end for other things to be born?

When I was young, my faith was like a great edifice. While in seminary, I labored mightily to construct an airtight monument, setting doctrine upon doctrine. By the time I graduated, I had built an impressive temple comprised of all of the appropriate doctrines that a traditional neo-orthodox theologian should possess. And then, that seemingly solid and enduring structure was toppled when I buried a seven month old child. Unjust suffering that inflicted emotional torture on a young mother and father toppled some of the massive tenets of my belief system, and I was plunged into a crisis of faith. Yet that experience proved to be the birth pangs that would eventually lead to richer insights and that a strongly held conviction is not as important as possessing a heart of compassion. So instead of attempting to build another airtight edifice, my new understandings of faith are not as impervious. I now try to keep open doors and windows so that God’s Spirit can blow fresh air through the corridors of my mind and the hallways of my soul.

If you ever find that some of your long-held beliefs are unraveling, it could be God’s Spirit provoking the restlessness, urging you to search for a deeper understanding.

When Will Willimon was a United Methodist Bishop Alabama, one of the ministers under his charge worked with the homeless in inner city Birmingham. One day he met with her and asked, “How in the world have you persevered in this shoestring ministry for over two decades?” She waved her hand over the desolation that is downtown Birmingham, and with a glint in her eyes, said, “I know a secret. All of this is transient.”²

She did not live merely by what she could see. She lived by the hope encapsulated in the words of Jesus: “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.”

The death of your loved one, your final day of work, the closing of a church, the breakup of a marriage...even such agonizing endings as these can be the prelude of something new to be birthed.

With every painful ending, God envisions a new beginning. Yet, God does not unilaterally impose the divine will on our lives. God points the way to a new path, but we must be willing to leave the familiar behind and embark on a new way.

If your livelihood is snatched away
or your health teeters on the brink;
if a trusted friend betrays you
or darkness shrouds your soul,
your confidence collapses
and the river of your courage becomes vapor.
You may shake your fist in protest
and rant against the wrongdoing,
but eventually you will tire of howling into the void.
It is then, that you must peer in every direction
and tune your ears to the whispers within you,
because this could be the beginning of the birth pangs.
Arouse your hope from its slumber. A new day awaits you.

NOTES

1. William Willimon, *Untitled, A Sermon for Every Sunday*, November 18, 2018.
2. *Ibid.*

Prayers of the People – Sudie Niesen Thompson

Every good and perfect gift comes from you, O God of Life. In this season of gratitude, we are mindful of the blessings in our lives, and of the many ways we experience your grace in moments both extraordinary and ordinary. We give thanks for loved ones — for circles of support and the fellowship of friends. We give thanks for opportunities to gather — around tables that remind us of your bounty, in communities that embody your care. We give thanks, O God, for your love that binds all things together.

As we pause to remember the blessings we enjoy, we are mindful — too — of all that is not as it should be:

We pray for those we hold dear — our family, our friends, our community of faith. We seek your peace for those who mourn, your comfort for those who are ill, your hope for those who despair. We pray for our neighbors throughout the world, many of whom suffer from devastating disasters or entrenched conflict: We lift before you the people of California whose homes and hopes, livelihoods and lives have been lost to the flames. We lift before you the people of Israel/Palestine, and of all lands that are torn apart by violence. God — There is so much to grieve when wars and wildfires rage. Pour out your Spirit upon this hurting world, until all creation experiences your wholeness.

Generous God — You give us imagination and intellect, hands to serve and hearts to love. Help us use these gifts to glorify you. As we await the day when justice will take root in every neglected neighborhood, and peace will blossom in every war-torn land, the day when tears no longer flow, and sorrow gives way to joy — we pray that you would draw us into your healing work. Inspire us, empower us, send us — we pray — to proclaim the good news, until that blessed day dawns.

This we pray in the name of your Son, who gave us words to pray:

Our Father, who art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.