

“Edifice Wrecks”

You can still go there. In Jerusalem today there is a remnant of the Temple Jesus knew. The remnant is called the Western Wall, and it’s massive. When you’re standing near it you can scarcely imagine that what is before you represents only a miniscule portion of a retaining wall at the base of the Temple. Looming above is the Dome of the Rock mosque, built on a massive mound of Temple ruins. But it, too, is tiny compared to the scale of the original Temple. The Temple dominated the City of Jerusalem in a way that has no parallel I know of today. Herod the Great built it as a monument to his ability to build great monuments, and no doubt he intended it to last forever; but it outlived him by only about seventy-five years. Sic transit gloria mundi. Thus passes the glory of the world.

And, like Jesus, today you can still sit on the Mount of Olives, a hill that overlooks the Holy City. In one glimpse you can take in the Western Wall, the Dome of the Rock, and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the holiest Christian site on earth. You don’t even have to turn your head to see them all; but you can’t help but shake your head at the conflict and bloodshed those holy sites represent. These are not imaginary places. They can lift your spirit and break your heart. No wonder Jesus wept over Jerusalem.

Towering edifices and the wrecks of time: our lesson today points us in that direction through the eerie picture language of apocalyptic. “Apocalyptic” comes from a Greek word that means “unveiling” or “revealing.” It is essentially the Greek name of the last book of the Bible, Revelation. It’s like a first century disaster movie: we can’t stand to watch but we don’t dare not look. As numerous reviewers of the new blockbuster movie *2012* have noted, disaster movies are a risk free adrenaline rush from simulated danger. We emerge shaken, but glad to be alive: shaken and stirred, I suppose. And I imagine that the more thoughtful disaster movies (is that an oxymoron?) cause us to see ourselves in a different light. It’s life and death on the edge of the abyss... with popcorn.

But apocalyptic literature is not about thrills. It is the ultimate language of reassurance: for when you boil it all down, the message is that even terrible things are not outside the purposes of God. It’s an odd and

frightening way of saying something we say all the time and truly need to hear: nothing can separate us from the love of God. Not fire, or earthquakes, or persecutions, or you name it. The language and imagery may be off-putting to us; but often they described things the readers had already experienced... or were just about to.

Today's lesson marks a dramatic heightening of the tension in the Gospel of Mark. We are still in the last week of Jesus' ministry, drawing closer and closer to his arrest and crucifixion. He's been locked in noisy dispute with the religious leadership in the Temple. Two weeks ago we had a reminder of first principles: love God and neighbor. Last week we overheard Jesus' condemnation of the Temple establishment, a dressing-down of the scribes with all their pious pretensions and self-serving pomp and circumstance. The Temple's corruption was confirmed in the person of the widow who piously, generously and sacrificially put all she had into the Temple coffers. But the graciousness of that act was all but overshadowed by the total disconnect between what the gift meant to her and how it was received—disappearing into the insatiable maw of the Temple machine, her very life devoured without sentiment or acknowledgment. The Temple is supposed to be a means of living out devotion to God; but here it has become an end unto itself.

And so the stage is set for today's conversation, in which one of the disciples marvels to Jesus, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" You can almost hear Gomer Pyle exclaiming, "Golly!" And why not: the stones measured 38 feet by 18 feet by 12 feet, and there were thousands of them! Can you imagine? Surely such a thing would last forever. But as Jesus departs the Temple confines for the last time, he now sees in the Temple nothing but a pile of rubble. "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

Many scholars believe that the Temple had already been destroyed by the time the Gospel of Mark was written in about 70 CE. So it is likely that to the first readers of Mark, Jesus' "prediction" was accomplished fact. We can only imagine how shattering that would have been. In a world without a 24/7 news cycle, all wars would begin as distant rumors. News that the Roman legions were coming would be followed by interminable waiting. They would take their time, moving slowly and methodically, preparing to lay siege to a city for months or even years in order to accomplish the inevitable end. It is impossible for us to imagine ancient peoples actually

building the Jerusalem Temple. But it is equally remarkable that the Romans would feel the need to reduce the whole thing to rubble.

So Mark's first readers had experienced the trauma of the Temple's destruction. But for these early Christians, the aftermath was equally horrific. Initially, of course, they were a part of Judaism; but they soon found themselves on the losing end of a struggle over the direction the faith would take now that the Temple had been destroyed. As our lesson implies, many indeed laid claim to the right to exert leadership, and eventually Christians were expelled from the synagogues and persecuted by the Roman Empire. All of this is reflected in the remainder of Mark 13. But the assertion of the Christian community is that these trials and tribulations are birth pangs, the labor pains of the new age. Christians are encouraged to persevere.

This basic message of hope can get swept away by the dramatic imagery of apocalyptic. Modern people read passages like this morning's lesson and immediately try to view them through our own experience. "It mentions earthquakes... *we've* had earthquakes!" "It mentions *famines*... *we've* had famines!" "It mentions false messiahs... *we've* had false messiahs, like Jim Jones!" Just this fall there was a so-called educational series on the Book of Revelation, running for a week at a local motel and unlocking all the mysteries of this biblical "code language." That stuff has about as much substance to it as the "Paul is dead" Beatle conspiracy of the 1960's: play the White Album backwards at just the right speed and it says, "Turn me on, dead man"... honest!

All this sort of nonsense obscures the greater point to be made by this passage: institutions that stray from their God-given purpose stand under the judgment of God. Every institution, even the Temple, was built to fulfill a mission. When it becomes an end in itself—when the care and feeding of the building, the personnel and the apparatus become all-consuming, when it ceases to be a house of prayer and becomes a den of robbers—then it is poised to become another of history's edifice wrecks.

This thought ought to be particularly sobering to us as we contemplate how we use our resources in the season of stewardship: both how we share our gifts with the church and how, together, we use all of those gifts in God's service. As we think about budgets—our own and those we formulate together—we are challenged to bear in mind the mission of the church. Now more than ever we should be reminding one another of our central purpose to increase the love of God and neighbor.

We seek to increase love of God and neighbor by calling people into discipleship; by engaging in ministries that have as their aim the transformation of individual lives and the transformation of the world in which we live. We seek to call people into a real and vital relationship with God as God is made known to us in Jesus Christ. We teach the practices of discipleship including worship, study (particularly of the Bible) and prayer; and together we work to devise ways of serving the community both through acts of charity (assistance to those in need both directly and through institutions) and through acts of justice (influencing the structures of society to favor those who cannot care for themselves.)

When we talk about growing in our love for God, we mean loving God with all our heart, seeking to become a community of caring that fosters meaningful relationships; with all our soul as a community of genuine worship and regular prayer; with all our mind as we become a teaching and learning church; and with all our strength, using our abilities and resources not merely in the institutional machinations of this place but in generosity that overflows in demonstrations of the love of God in the world.

We do this within a congregational culture that values diversity because of all that differences contribute to deepening and enriching the journey of faith in which we are engaged. That journey inspires us to focus more on our commitments and covenants than on creeds. It calls us to be a people-oriented community rather than a bottom-line business. It is not enough to have a wonderful building and a healthy balance sheet; what matters is what happens in people's lives in and through this place.

A building is a tool for ministry. A professional staff is a tool for ministry—some of us are finely honed chisels, some blunt instruments, but all have their gifts to share. We the staff don't do the work of the church; we exist to help the church do the work of the church. And all the church's organizations, groups and gatherings are vehicles for ministry, as well. We are a people on a mission, and that mission of loving God and neighbor, performing charity and justice, and doing all of that in a searching and diverse community... that mission matters. It matters so much that if all that is here at 42nd and Ingersoll suddenly ceased to exist, the church would live on and take new form.

So we give not to the form, but to the mission. We give of our time, talent and treasure. We are asked to open ourselves, heart and soul, strength and mind, to one another and to the world; to listen carefully to our lives because God is still speaking in and through them; to engage intentionally

and not just consume passively; to allow the journey of faith to become the 24/7 undertaking that grounds and deepens everything else we do: our relationships, our vocations, our politics, our recreation. And as a symbol of all of that we offer a portion of our resources to God.

It's not the institution crying, "Seymour! Feed me!" This pile of bricks may well outlast all of us, but it will do so only if future generations rise to take up the mission they are here to fulfill. And in any event one day these bricks will be gone. But the mission they are here to serve will live on. Thanks be to God.

Amen

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