

Waiting in Love, Not Anxiety (Mark 13:1-8)

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The Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

(I Samuel 1:4-20; I Samuel 2:1-10; Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18), 19-25)

WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/waiting-in-love-not-anxiety/

Mark 13:1-8 (NRSV)

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

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

If we understand the chronology of Mark's gospel correctly, Jesus speaks these words at the end of Tuesday, three days before his crucifixion. He and his disciples are standing on the Temple Mount, gazing together at the sheer opulence of one of the grandest temples ever built. Jesus and those who followed him were Galileans, not the sophisticated urban crowd who had grown blasé about the glory of the Temple. For them, its grandeur took their breath away.

They marveled at the Temple for good reason. It stood majestically on the peak of Mount Zion, a tabletop plaza that towered over the old city of King David. The Temple courtyard walls were of white marble that glistened in the bright sunshine. Massive stone columns majestically lined the perimeter of the Temple Mount holding up the porches that surrounded God's great earthly plateau. The Temple itself, straddling Mount Zion, the peak of which was reportedly where Abraham prepared to slay Isaac as a human sacrifice to God. The Temple Mount in its immensity was some 37 acres in all, and the Temple was over a hundred feet tall. The walls of the Temple were covered with great sheets of gold that blinded the approaching visitors.

From a distance, the Temple Mount was a brilliant spectacle. Josephus wrote of a snowy winter scene in which the gold on the temple "reflected so fierce a blaze of fire that those who tried to look at it were forced to turn away ... it seemed in the distance like a mountain covered in snow, for any part not covered in gold was dazzling white."

It is not surprising that long after the Temple had been destroyed, the rabbis would claim, “Whoever has not seen the Temple ... has never seen a beautiful building in his life.”¹

It was the week of Passover when Jesus and his disciples entered Jerusalem, a time when the city was bloated with religious pilgrims. During Passover, it is estimated that the city’s population swelled from its normal 25,000 to as many as 125,000 people, and one can only imagine the congestion of pilgrims and priests, beasts and blood, and lots and lots of money. It must have been mind-boggling. And there they all stood, gaping at the blinding wonder of it all and thinking about how magnificent it all was, when Jesus blurted out the stunning words, *“Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down”* (Mark 13:2, NRSV).

Hard to imagine? Perhaps it might be like a group of us standing on the mall in Washington D.C. during a bright, sunny July 4th celebration with hundreds of thousands of visitors. One of us, seeing past all the breathtaking grandeur of it all begins to speak as if overtaken by a blinding vision and imagining the utter desolation of everything. It would be as if one of us had a supernatural ability to envision the absolute destruction of every significant building of our national capital and in its place a vision of rubble and smoke and destruction.

Jesus looked past the swarm of visitors, past the cacophony of sights and sounds, past the blindingly beautiful opulence of the stark white Temple and all he saw were ruins. Only stones left in a heap. No rhyme or reason about the way they were skewed on the ground as if they were a child’s wooden blocks strewn carelessly on the floor. Only the remembrance of what they had helped to form when they were originally brought to this peak of land. The disciples were bowled over by what he saw and the absolute clarity by which he described it to them and they asked him, *“When will this be?” “And what will be the sign that this is about to take place?”*

Those have been the questions asked by every generation of believers that has come along in the two millennia since. “Is this the time when Jesus will come back?” “Are the signs of the times warning us to be ready?” Every generation of believers that’s lived has struggled with those questions. And yet, the answer has been “No” over and over and over again. Jesus has some direct advice for those who fear that the end is approaching: *“Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many 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. This is but the beginning of birth pangs”* (Mark 13:5-8, NRSV).

There are Christian doomsayers who add to the cultural hysteria with their warnings. And Jesus tells us simply, *“Do not go after them.”* Do not be terrified. When the sky is falling? When the

¹ Notes on the splendor of ancient Jerusalem are from William Ramsey, *Lectionary Homiletics*, Nov. 1998, 19, and Karen Armstrong, *Jerusalem, One City, Three Faiths*, 1991, 134

world is coming to an end? That's right. Do not go after them. Do not be terrified. Don't you hear the comforting words of Jesus throughout the gospels?

When he first appeared to the disciples after the resurrection, he mysteriously appeared among them and the first thing he told them was, "Peace be with you." Peace ... not chaos and confusion. Peace ... not fearfulness or trembling.

Jesus soberly warned them that the future would not be safe. He pointed to a time that was coming when the children of God would not be safe from evil in the world. Arrests and persecution were the ways the world announced their opposition to the good news of God's reconciling love through Jesus. Believers who followed Jesus had to be ready to pick up their cross and die with him. Most of us have known virtually nothing in our personal experience how those persecutions may come. But they have come.

True, there are places in the world today where a Christian witness is not safe. Persecution comes in nations throughout Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. Recently, as many as 100,000 churches in America participated in the annual International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. In their prayers, they gave attention to the worldwide plight of Christian believers who suffer for the gospel, just as Jesus predicted. This group sees their sisters and brothers who are persecuted as modern-day Christian martyrs and remembers them through their prayers.

Could that type of opposition to the gospel occur here in America where we live and witness? More likely the answer is "No, at least not anytime soon." But there are no looming certainties about that likelihood. Jesus' warning to be ready to be persecuted for your faith has a long and storied history of truthfulness in world history. And we shouldn't grow too accustomed to the protections that we currently enjoy and assume they couldn't develop even here.

For the first 300 years after the ministry of Jesus, the Christian church suffered tremendously. They were hunted like animals and brought before the various magistrates and kings and challenged to renounce their beliefs in Jesus. Many of them recanted under the tremendous pressure of torture. But many more clung courageously to the faith, refusing to claim any other name than Jesus' and thus joining a large group of believers who became the church's heroes by their martyrdom.

*God in the midst of us,
Lord in the heart of the person next to us,
Christ in the face of those who need us:
Let us never be so heavenly minded
That we are of no earthly good.
But help us to see your heaven on earth, to claim it,
To help you create it, to love it wherever we find it,
To love you wherever we find you
Coming to make your home here with us.*

Amen.
Dr. Larry Bethune

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