

Mark 13:1-8 Bill Uetricht 11.13.24 26 Pentecost

Will you indulge me today as I share a little bit of my oddity? Every time I read the first sentence of Mark's gospel reading for today, I am taken back to the "Little Red Riding Hood" story in which Little Red Riding Hood meets up with someone she thinks is her grandma, but really is a wolf in disguise. "My, what large hands you have," she says. "My what large eyes, what large ears, and, finally, my what large teeth." Little Red Riding Hood is enamored with the largeness of the attributes of someone she thought was her grandma.

I know it's weird, but it's what I think of every time I confront the words of one of Jesus' disciples in Mark today: "My, what large stones there are. My, what large buildings there are." The reference is to the temple in Jerusalem. And it *was* large. It was five football fields long, three football fields wide. It was a magnificent facility, built by the miserable Herod the Great who spared no expense to create this wonder, a wonder that was a gift to the Jews, but probably was about Herod's need to be famous. History is filled with all kinds of narcissistic leaders who use religion for their own purposes. And that clearly was Herod. But, nonetheless, what he produced in the temple was amazing.

Jesus' disciple today was rightfully amazed by the presence of the temple. Truthfully, many people were amazed by the temple. For them, the temple was a mind-blowing experience of the presence of God, as well as an architectural and artistic wonder. But Jesus doesn't seem so enamored with it.

After Jesus' disciple expresses words of admiration for the temple, Jesus becomes somewhat of a kill joy: "Do you see these buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." Jesus has this way of confronting us with the harsh truth. What is an incredible tribute to human ingenuity and human determination, he says, is going to become a pile of ashes.

Now honestly, scholars are all over the map about the exact timing of the writing of the Gospel of Mark. Most modern scholars will date Mark somewhere between 65 and 70 A.C.E. And perhaps you know that the temple of Jerusalem *was* destroyed by fire and looting in 70 A.C.E. by the Romans and some Jewish rebels. Was Mark in his gospel anticipating that destruction, or was he reporting it after the fact? It's hard to know for sure. But what is for sure is that the temple eventually crumbled, making Jesus' words accurate.

I don't know how Jesus' disciple responded to Jesus' words about the temple's destruction, but I find what he has to say disturbing. Maybe it's my advancing years, but I am troubled by the truth that what you or I treasure so much too easily disintegrates and disappears. The life that we know too quickly becomes something that we don't recognize.

Back in the nineties after I moved here to Muskegon, I visited a 100-year-old woman who when I arrived at the living center where she resided, was not lying on her bed as I anticipated, but was exercising on her treadmill. Obviously, she was a very healthy woman, but as we talked many times over the years until she died at age 108, I discovered that more than anything this rugged Norwegian woman wanted to die. Why? Because of pain, suffering, sickness? No. As she lived with her grandkids, she realized that the world she had been living in and made sense to her was not the world she was living in at the end of her life. It seemed to her that not one stone was left upon stone. It felt like to her that almost everything had been thrown down.

That's the way life is sometimes. What is so important, what we treasure so much disintegrates. The world as we knew it is not the world as we know it. We experience a dramatic loss of world.

It is "loss of world" that gave birth to Biblical apocalypticism. The literature we find in books like Revelation, Daniel, and the thirteenth

chapter of Mark, the source for our gospel reading today, made its appearance during times when it felt like no stone was being left upon stone. Frequently, these were times of persecution. In Daniel, the persecution came from a nasty, narcissistic Greek leader. In Revelation and in Mark, it came from the oppressive Romans.

These times of persecution were times when it felt like the whole world was falling apart, which is why in apocalyptic literature you hear words like these: “For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines.” In other words, the end will be an experience of the world falling apart; “the foundations are shaking,” as Paul Tillich put it.

Often when people hear this kind of talk, they think that the focus is on the future, and in some ways, it is. But mostly, the focus is on the now. Things are falling apart now. The world as we knew it is not the world as we know it. The foundations are shaking now. So what do we do *now*? How do we live *now*? How to live now is the primary focus of apocalyptic literature.

Unfortunately, too many people view books like Revelation and Daniel as predictors of the future, and often a future that is quite horrible. They see these incredible writings as ones that anticipate what China, Russia, the United States and Israel are about to do, often making people nervous and anxious about the future, scaring them, getting them to buy food packages they are to store in their basement, causing them to support questionable political agendas. But you folks are going to be smarter than that. You’ll know that these apocalyptic writings represent a kind of literature that ultimately is meant to bring hope and encouragement for right now.

You’ll realize that Daniel’s reference to Israel’s patron angel Michael protecting Israel and his reference to dead people being brought back to life were not intended to give us a definitive picture of

what is going to happen at the end of time. No, Daniel's words were meant to encourage people for whom the world feels like it is falling apart to live with faith now. The point is that what feels like the end isn't the end. That nasty Greek leader doesn't get to speak the final word. God does. God brings life out of death. That is the message.

That, too, is the message from Mark. I wonder if you noted how today's reading ends? After the typical listing of what happens at the end—nation will rise against nation, earthquakes in various places—Jesus in Mark says, "This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." Wow! Birth pangs? That's fascinating. Birth pangs, as painful as they are, are a precursor to birth. In other words, something new, life-giving is about to emerge.

Often when people talk about all the horrible things listed in apocalyptic literature, they think that the end is a matter of everything being destroyed. But that is not the picture here. According to Jesus in Mark, this is just the beginning of the birth pangs. In other words, this loss of world is not the end. What feels like the end is not the end. There is more to come because God gets to speak the final word. In case you don't remember, the political and religious leaders killed Jesus, but God raised him from the dead. The final word is life. In the end, love wins.

This is the primary message of Biblical apocalyptic books. And it is a message which is intended to inspire you and me, so we don't throw in the towel, so that we don't give up or give in. I think the author of Hebrews today understands that message. Listen to his words:

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for God 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.

Oh, it's true. Life slips through our fingers. What we cherish too often disintegrates. The world as we know it is not the world as we knew it. Hold fast. God is good. God means well. Don't give up on love. The world needs your love. And you need to keep getting together in communities of love. You need encouragement. You need accountability. Love wants to draw you together for the sake of the mission of love.

Yes, it seems that everything changes. Yes, sometimes you have to watch the temple fall down. But God gets the last word. Love remains. Love lasts forever. And therefore, the work of love remains as well—the work of loving the neighbor, being generous with the stranger, protecting the creation, healing old wounds and not creating new ones. The work of love is calling you. Get up and get going. The love that is your gift will not let you sit still.