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First Presbyterian Church
November 14, 2021
Mark 13:1-18

“The End Times”

There isn't a Sunday that goes by that I don't look around and marvel at the beauty of this sanctuary. The stained glass window that you get to admire more than me! The fine woodwork of the pews, the care taken with the moldings; the fine attention to detail. The fabulous winding steps up into this pulpit; the smoothness of the railing under my hand. Look around you! Really, look around you! In my humble and completely biased opinion it is the most magnificent sanctuary in the city.

“Rabbi, what stones! What stones, what a grand, eternal looking temple!” said the disciple.

“Not a stone will be left unturned,” claimed Jesus. “This great building will be destroyed! Wars! Rumors of wars! Nation against nation. Earthquakes! Famines!”

This is Jesus' longest sermon in the Gospel according to Mark. He speaks to the twelve and lets them in on a somber secret. This building will end.

We're at the end of the church year; the liturgical calendar turns in just two weeks with the beginning of Advent. This is the last we'll hear from Mark's gospel for a while, and truth be told I'm glad for it. Mark's gospel begins and ends abruptly. At the beginning the heavens are torn open and the Spirit descends on Jesus, and at the end the curtain temple is torn in two as Jesus takes his last breath, and the women flee the empty tomb in fear and don't tell anyone what they've just seen. Mark begins and ends with a bang. Unlike other books in the Bible, Mark was never meant to help us feel safe and secure in the world. Mark was written in the midst of great confusion, distress, and worry. And people wanted to know “when is Jesus coming?” And “How shall we live in the meantime?” Keep your seatbelts on for the flight, Mark replies! Because the life of discipleship looks like the road to the cross, and that's one bumpy road.

In today's reading Jesus talks about a cataclysmic ending. But contrary to what we may believe or were taught, Jesus isn't predicting the future, he's talking about

the precariousness of the present. “This temple, this world, isn’t as stable and eternal as it may appear,” he tells us.

Now normally we get nervous when Jesus talks apocalyptic. We like it when Jesus is a great moral teacher and waxes poetic about giving to the poor; we can handle that. We like it even better when he gives us a spiritual boost. But not this; not here. On the way to his end, he gives us the honest truth and speaks of our end. It’s all ending! Your great monuments will be reduced to rubble!

No Buildings and Ground Committee, nor anyone who has made a pledge to support something as routine as paying the light bill wants to hear it’s all going to come to an end. Is it any wonder we shy away from stories like these? Why in 25 years of ministry I’ve managed to only preach on this passage one another time!

But then again, we know this! Look at the past 18 months! It used to be we’d get nervous about these stories; leave them up to the street corner preacher to tell with his cardboard sign proclaiming the end is near. How can this be, we’d scoff. But now we know better, because we’ve lived through 2020. And 2021.

A year ago this time we were getting ready to shut down for a second time, and Covid cases were on the rise and would far surpass what we saw in the Spring of 2020. I was scheming how to build my bunker of toilet paper and frozen meat so I could feed my 4 kids without making numerous trips to the grocery. We’d just voted in what some people claimed was a rigged election; could it all be overthrown in this free and fair democracy, we wondered? Little did we know a year ago that some would try. A vaccine was on the horizon, and eventually the news covered footage of trucks rolling out of the Pfizer plant in Michigan. Remember that? What hope there was? The end of the pandemic was in sight! But even science became politicized. We have more experience with chaos now. An apocalypse doesn’t seem as far-fetched as it once did.

What if our magnificent buildings are a delusion? An illusion? The preacher Will Willimon says: “There’s a reason why churches are built to look 600 years older than they really are. Why the pews are bolted to the floor!” Our pews are bolted to the floor. Do we really think someone is going to walk in here and steal a pew? Perhaps we want to cure our feelings of precariousness so we make sure it all looks very permanent. “Not one stone will be left hereupon another; all will be

thrown down.” Does Jesus really want us to feel as precarious as it seems (he does)?

Back when I started seminary I can remember many a student crying foul over what we were being taught. I think they expected some glorified version of their Sunday School lessons, not the rigor of Greek and Hebrew exegesis that we got. How dare the professor teach us this, some wondered? Their belief system was being torn down, the stones they’d so carefully laid being ripped out from under them. I remember smugly wondering what they’d expected from a Masters of Divinity program. I’d just come from a liberal arts college where I’d majored in Religious Studies and been taught to think critically about religion. But my time would also come where everything I thought I knew and believed was also torn down and destroyed.

Paul puts it this way as he hears God say to one of his congregations: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and discard the intelligence of the intelligent.”

Friends if there’s one thing I’ve come to learn and appreciate it’s that there’s no arrival of God without some sort of departure. There’s no grasping of faith without relinquishment. In every move toward God something is gained, but something is also lost. And that loss can be painful.

Maybe this is why Jesus’ words as he leaves the temple for the last time are the ones he gives us today, reminding us in a not-so-gentle way that nothing about us is permanent. Nothing is built to last. Life is precarious, not one stone will be left here upon another stone. This is our situation.

Aren’t you glad you came today! What doom and gloom. No wonder I’ve only preached this passage once.

But he ends his sermon with this: “this is but the beginning of birth pains.” Every time I’ve read this passage I’ve thought, “Now what does Jesus know about birth pains?” Birth pains hurt! Only those who have never given birth or have a very high tolerance for pain think they can be cured by breathing exercises or yoga-like positions. When I was in labor with Henry, my first, I called my sister and asked if I should take the epidural. “Don’t be stupid Annie; take the epidural.” Labor hurts!

But reading the story this go around, a few years removed from the labor pains of my last child, I read with fresh eyes, and remembered that by the grace of God, labor pains result in the birth of something new.

Reflecting on that I wonder, could it be that what we call death is, in the hands of God, birth? That out of an ending God can make a beginning? I think so, my friends. I believe so.

But if you're still wondering how this apocalyptic gospel could possibly be good news, let me offer up that depending on where you're coming from, it could be bad news.

Will Willimon tells the story about going on a mission trip to Honduras and working in an impoverished village for a couple of weeks. One night after dinner the group sat around with some of the locals when someone said, "Let's all share what our favorite Bible story is." The usual stories were shared: John 3:16, Psalm 23, and the parable of the prodigal son . . . until they got to one of the local women. "Mark 13," she stated through an interpreter. "That passage has always been such a comfort." A comfort! Are you kidding, Willimon thought! Sounds to me like Jesus is having a bad day! Apocalyptic? A comfort? The nurse next to Willimon told him that three of the woman's five children had died of infant malnutrition.

Willimon said, "When Jesus says to me, a well futured, reasonably safe and secure person: Hey, God is going to dismantle all of this. I hear bad news! But a woman for whom my comfortable status quo has been hell, maybe she hears Jesus talk of the end and of destruction and death and new birth, maybe she hears that as gospel."

Now friends, I could say the same thing. And so can some of you. I, too, lead a safe and reasonably secure life, and my future looks pretty good with my PC(USA) pension and health care. But perhaps my comfortable status quo, and dare I say, some of your status quo, has been hell for others. Perhaps we, too, only hear in this passage death and destruction because we don't want there to be birth pains. And not because we don't want others to have a new beginning, but because we fear their new beginning may spell an ending for us. But as one of my good friends likes to say, "Privilege isn't pie. It's not going to run out." Someone

else's beginning does not spell an ending for us. There is more than enough to go around in God's economy.

In 2016, American author and social activist Adrienne Maree Brown wrote the following in reference to racial injustice and the Black Lives Matter movement: "Things are not getting worse, they are getting uncovered." The same can be said about the #MeToo movement, or bringing to light clergy sexual abuse cases, or a gymnast stepping aside for the sake of her mental health, or women protesting at the steps of the Supreme Court because we're tired of not being trusted to make decisions about our own bodies.

Could it be that what we've been witnessing the past year and a half is the beginning of birth pains? That out of all this trouble a new baby will come? That Maybe the end of your status quo or my status quo is for someone else the gospel: the beginning of birth pains? Which is tough stuff, I realize. No one wants to live in such precariousness!

But endings can signify new beginnings. Graduations are commencements, an empty nest is a new-found freedom, as can be retirement once one adjusts to the newness. But even devastating endings, such as the end of a marriage, a rejection letter, a pink slip – can by God's grace be birth pains that offer a new world.

Friends, I think I am more afraid of our lack of imagination, and our resistance to change and dreaming, than I am an apocalyptic threat of the end times. We must be willing to participate in the birthing of a new age. We must be open to imagining new forms of community, and new structures and systems of power.

Adrienne Maree Brown also wrote: "What we pay attention to grows." Will we pay attention to love and healing in families and friendships, or will we pay attention to hatred spewed across our screens? Will we pay attention to patterns of generosity and grace between neighbors and strangers, or will we pay attention the scarcity mindset that wants to prevail? Let us be protagonists, not antagonists, in what Brown calls "the great turning, the change, the new economy, the new world."

Today Jesus takes us to the mountaintop with his disciples to survey and attend to our present landscape. What do we notice? What patterns emerge? What would

grow if we paid attention to it? “This is but the beginning...” Jesus says, inspiring us to imagine and hope for what is to come.

Amen.

Sources:

- Journey With Jesus, “Not One Stone”, Debie Thomas, November 11, 2018
- Presbyterian Outlook, commentary on Mark 13:1-8, November 14, 2021, Rev. Teri McDowell Ott
- Rev. Will Willimon, the 25th Sunday after ordinary time, year B, 2018