

The Beginning of the End
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Mark 13:1-8

As an undergraduate, I had the privilege of spending a summer working on the excavation in the Agora – the public square which is roughly equivalent to the Mall in Washington - in Athens. One of our professors just happened to be in charge of the dig, which enabled many of us classics majors to get down into the dirt with our subject material. One of the highlights of that summer was a field trip to the Acropolis, that high ground overlooking the city which is home to the Parthenon, the temple of the city's patron deity, Athena. Even with all the damage it's sustained over the 2500-plus years since its construction, it is an impressive piece of architecture – and, it is much larger than you would think. I remember distinctly getting down on the ground and looking over the slightly curved line of the foundation (necessary to maintain the optical illusion of perfect corners!), with its massive, perfectly cut limestone blocks stacked more neatly than any Lego creation, and thinking, "Wow! How'd they DO that?"

That same sense of awe and wonder is what we hear from the disciples this morning. They've moved across the street from their previous location in the Temple. As they're doing so, someone says to Jesus, "'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" (Mk 13:2, NRSV). And as is typical for Mark, Jesus reserves the detailed explanation for a private conversation with a select few. He tells them in no uncertain terms: change is coming, and not necessarily in a good way.

On the surface, there's not much good news here: Jesus warns the disciples that "All will be thrown down;" and that there will be "wars, and rumors of wars... 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..." (Mk 13:2, 8, NRSV) Jesus goes on from here and uses this, his last big teaching opportunity with the disciples before his death, to outline all of the bad stuff that's yet to come. Persecutions. The desolating sacrilege. The stars falling out of the sky. And, only after all that, the "Son of Man [will come] in clouds with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven" (Mk 13:26-27). It doesn't seem to be all that promising, even with the tiny bit of hope inserted at the end, does it?

It's worth remembering that this whole chapter, widely known as "Mark's apocalypse" – a revelation about the end of the world – was written for a community that was not feeling very good about its future. The gospel was recorded against the backdrop of a chaotic few decades which culminated in the Romans' destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The historian Flavius Josephus describes a number of movements in ancient Israel which were working for liberation from Roman occupation in the early part of the 1st century. There was already a great deal of unrest in Jesus' day. Things only got much worse in the years which followed his death. Christian communities were forced to wrestle with whether Gentile converts actually had a place there; what the redemption of Israel actually meant in light of the events of that first Easter; and whether there was any role for them to play in resisting their Roman oppressors. Josephus' records aren't what modern historians would call either complete or unbiased, and so

we're left to guess at what exactly was going on to provoke Mark to record this dark vision of the future.¹ Whether what Jesus describes here indicates some knowledge of the destruction of the Temple is a matter of debate... and we don't know much, if anything, about how the early Christian communities reacted to the disruption of the Jewish ones which harbored them.

Regardless of the exact circumstances behind this revelation, Jesus' words are not particularly reassuring. We like certainty about the timing and scope of such events, and we don't always react well on hearing that the world is about to come crashing down around our ears and we can't do anything about it. Whether those predictions come straight from Jesus himself, or from any number of modern-day doomsayers, they share two key characteristics. One is the precision of the predictions of manner, method, and timing which are quickly debunked when they fail to come true. The second is that the predictors often set up an "us-vs.-them" situation, where the "them" is anyone who doesn't share their certainty.

It's worth pointing out that Jesus, the actual first-century Jewish man, may well have had those tendencies as well. It's important for us to recognize that reality sometimes doesn't fit very well with the depictions of Jesus in the Gospels. What's clear from them is that "... At least, Jesus recognized his own limitations... And, his end-time predictions, in chapter 13, were apparently reserved for his closest followers."² They likely understood that the end of which Jesus speaks is a DESTINATION – which is

¹ William Loader, "First Thoughts on Year B Gospel Passages from the Lectionary: Pentecost 26." <https://billloader.com/MkPentecost26Ord33.html> [accessed November 12, 2024].

² Emerson Powery, "Commentary on Mark 13:1-8." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-33-2/commentary-on-mark131-8-3> [accessed November 12, 2024].

what the Greek word Mark is using for it, *telos*, connotes – and we have to read much further into this chapter to learn that the beginning all of the wars, and buildings being thrown down, and false messiahs, leads to the end point of the Son of Man arriving on clouds descending. In terms of the Church's calendar, it brings us full circle. That image is where we started off our reading of Mark on the first Sunday of Advent last year – and it is where we are once again going as we approach the turn of the seasons.

What's in this for us, in the season of change we're in now?

Regardless of the arena, to be human is to be drawn to things that are "big" and impressive – whether that's a building, a way of life, or a personality. When it comes to "churchy" stuff, it manifests in terms of an endless list of things like overall membership and attendance numbers, program offerings, "... innovation. Stewardship campaigns, 'transformative' preaching, Christmas pageants. Christian education, moving worship, building projects — there is no end to what large stones we seek to erect."³

What Jesus is trying to get across to the disciples here is that those stones are not the answer. Faithfulness is. And what that looks like in terms of this building, made of stones, is this: the people who are here are continuing to do what we do best: showing up for each other when things aren't going well; pooling our resources so we can help our neighbors in need; offering rest from the turbulence of the world we live in; and showing anyone who's watching, by word and example, what it looks like to do as Jesus did and stand in solidarity with those on the margins. In these seemingly small ways we will, as our convention speaker, Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas, suggested last

³ Karoline Lewis, "Storied Stones." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/storied-stones> [accessed November 12, 2024].

weekend, open ourselves up to Jesus' claim on us and his call to be peacemakers.⁴

When we see stones being thrown down around us, that kind of faithfulness – to Jesus, and to our commitments to caring for one another – is what will get us through.

⁴ The Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas, "Being Church when Our Humanity Is at Stake." The Episcopal Diocese of Vermont (lecture, St. Paul's Cathedral, Burlington, Vermont, November 9, 2024).