

Humpty Dumpty Hope

25 Pentecost B

Nov. 14, 2021

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Gospel: Mark 13:1-8

In the last week of his life, Jesus warned his disciples concerning trials that were to come upon them & upon the world. He exhorts the listener: Do not be alarmed.

¹As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones & what large buildings!” ²Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” ³When Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, & Andrew asked him privately, ⁴“Tell us, when will this be, & what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” ⁵Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁶Many will come in my name & say, ‘I am the one!’ & they will lead many astray. ⁷When you hear of wars & rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. ⁸For nation will rise against nation, & country against country; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.”

Introduction

November begins with All Saints Day & ends in or near Advent, when we anticipate Christ’s coming again. It is fitting, then, that the readings today tell of the final resurrection & the end time. In the turmoil of hope, fear, & disbelief that these predictions provoke in us, Hebrews sounds a note of confident trust. Christ makes a way for us where there is no way, & we walk it confidently, our hearts & bodies washed in baptismal water, trusting the one who has promised forgiveness. The more we see the last day approaching, the more important it is to meet together to provoke one another to love.

Overview - Real Strength in Community of Faith

What makes something strong? Is steel strong because of its ability to withstand stress from many directions? Is wood strong because of its ability to absorb impact while remaining intact? Is the material of a spider’s web strong because of its tensile strength-to-weight ratio? Things are strong for many reasons. The temple in Jerusalem was thought to be stronger & more permanent than anything, yet Jesus says in Mark,

“Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down” (Mark 13:2). Jesus shows hearers that true strength is not built upon the oppression of widows (Mark 12:41-44). Many of the world’s most prized structures are built on the shoulders of the poor & oppressed. How many homes in poorer areas of cities have been destroyed by the need for a new or wider highway? How many workers living in poverty died building the Golden Gate or Brooklyn Bridges, the Hoover Dam or the Empire State Building? In order for human beings to build structures of great strength, they must rely on sacrifice & compromise. Can any human standard of strength be achieved without making something else weak? Real strength, however, is not shown in things built by human hands. Real strength is found in the hands themselves. True strength is shown in workers reporting to work day after day in impossible conditions because it’s the only way to feed their family. It is shown by an entire community of God’s people linking their trembling hands as they share the “confession of our hope without wavering” (Heb. 10:23). The new, true temple, Jesus’ faithful strength, succumbs in weakness to human-made nails. While the nails lie rusting away, the wounded hands & body rise again to break bread with all on the journey down the path of life.

Theological Reflection

These verses from Mark are better understood in the context of what comes before & after. Mark’s Jesus has already pointed out the systemic ills of the time & place in which he lives. The Roman government & temple leaders oppress the people. Widows are robbed of their living; their households are devoured. In today’s reading, when the disciples remark on the enormity of the temple, Jesus teaches that the buildings will be destroyed. He goes on to speak of evil times of hardship. Then, following in vvs 9-13 (not included in today’s reading), Jesus teaches the people how to live during times of persecution: “The good news must first be proclaimed to all nations” (Mark 13:10).

Theological Reflection

In today’s gospel Jesus speaks of the end times. The temple will be in ruins, & there will be wars, earthquakes, & famines. Earthquakes destroy things, even if just glass jars. Both literally & metaphorically, everything that appears to be stable—pantries, communities, shrines, religious beliefs, the earth itself—all will be shaken to pieces. Though a popular belief is that God causes such natural disasters, Christians can praise God for great power that is stronger than any powers of destruction. With the psalmist we can say, “Because God is at my right h&, I shall not be shaken” (Ps. 16:8).

“As [Jesus] came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Look, Teacher, what large stones & what large buildings!’” (Mark 13:1). Huge buildings reflect a sense of power & importance. Who hasn’t experienced a feeling of awe when entering a space like a capitol rotunda or a grand cathedral? You can see it in people’s faces as they stare up at the ceiling. The temple in Jerusalem would have been the biggest building any of the disciples had ever seen. No wonder they responded with awe. Jesus is not impressed by buildings, no matter how grand. Many of the things people are impressed with do not seem to matter to Jesus. Jesus is far more interested in generosity, compassion, mercy, & grace. It is a reminder of how easy it is to get distracted by the things of this world & ignore the greater gifts.

Connections with Creation

Eschatological texts such as those in today’s readings are sometimes used as justification for environmentally destructive practices such as fossil fuel extraction, deforestation, & a consumerism hell-bent on acquisition at all costs. Some Christians will say that since God is inaugurating the end of the earth, we might as well live it up & use it up for all it’s worth. However, in her book *The Rapture Exposed* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), New Testament scholar Barbara Rossing reveals the distorted theological lens used to interpret these texts on the basis of fear (& to sell millions of dollars’ worth of end-time books & movies). Preachers will need to counter these popular cultural motifs by lifting up both the warnings to live a life worthy of our Christian calling & the message of hope that God does not abandon us in the midst of cataclysmic events.

Mark 13:1-8

Near the close of the church year, the readings remind us of both the end of the world & the end of our lives. Come to worship to receive God’s comfort for whenever we face destruction & death. Mark 13 is the Christian version of classic Jewish apocalypticism. Everything that appears to be stable—the temple, religious truth, the nation, the earth itself—will be shaken to pieces. Apocalypticism became a comforting religious genre especially during the three centuries before Christ, as political realities suggested to the Jews that there was no way out of their oppression beyond a radical divine intervention that would destroy the regnant powers. By the time Mark’s gospel was written, the temple had been destroyed, which the early Christian community could see as the beginning of the end. However, for the evangelist, the ultimate cataclysmic event is the crucifixion, which is where chapter 13 is headed. According to Jesus, the

end is neither immediately upon us nor in the far distant future: more like labor pains, agonies recur throughout time, but God promises new birth & life on the other side of sorrow. For some Christian spiritualities, a literal interpretation of such passages remains significant. For others, such passages have continuous relevance, since we all face sorrow & death perpetually.

In vv. [1-2](#), Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple, as the prophets Micah & Jeremiah had done earlier. (His words were later used against him.) Did he mean it literally or figuratively? We don't know. (Both the Temple & the religious system were destroyed in 70 AD.) Then he & his first four disciples visit the Mount of Olives – a place mentioned in Zechariah [14:4](#) as being connected with events at the end of the era. They ask him: when will the Temple (“this”, v. [4](#)) be destroyed? How will we know that the end of the era is near? Jesus gives them three indicators:

- false claimants to being God's agent of renewal will appear, claiming “I am he!” (v. [6](#));
- international political conflicts (v. [8a](#)) will occur, as will
- natural disasters.

The figure of a woman in labor (“birthpangs”, v. [8](#)) is also used in Jeremiah, Hosea & Micah.

Images in the Readings

The Bible occasionally uses **labor pains** as an image for the suffering that can be endured since it births new life. Although some world religions, such as Buddhism, offer advice in light of perpetually recurrent suffering, Christianity, like biblical Judaism, trusts that God will finally bring an end to suffering. Labor will be over, & a newborn will live. Although many contemporary Christians believe in the immortality of the soul, the New Testament instead inherits from late biblical Judaism the doctrine of the **resurrection of the body**. Christ is the first to experience this bodily resurrection, but at the end of time all the dead will receive new life to experience everlasting life or everlasting contempt. The emphasis on a renewed body reflects the Jewish idea that a human person is a body, rather than the Greek worldview, according to which a soul inhabits a body for a time. For Judaism & Christianity, the body God created is so good that God will recreate it when all death is over.

- I. Jesus says the Great Temple will be destroyed. What are some of the temple 'stones' upon which you have built your life & have set your behaviors in motion to protect. (Portfolio/investments/savings, security of a house or nice things, love of family, health, good name, status, intelligence, reputation, abilities/competencies). When have you experienced them crumbling to ruin or a shadow of what you thought they would be? What sustained you during that time? (just pull yourself up by your bootstraps, just hold on til it passes, a belief that it'll all turn out OK [upon what was/is that belief based?])
- II. Jesus speaks of circumstances/events/occurrences which will raise anxiety, worry, speculation, etc. What things do you see in the world, the nation, the community, the church, & in your personal life that begin to prompt anxiety in you?
- III. As you have gained life wisdom, upon what 'stones' do you now build your life? How do you specifically strengthen/harden these foundation stones – or do you believe that once in place in your life they are forever just "ready". What regular spiritual practices do you maintain that strengthen your foundation – are they enough?
- IV. Jesus' instruction is to beware of ideas/people/trends that will lead us astray. Today's world is filled with alternate views of reality, fake news, obscure ideas that have followers, etc. How do you discern between mis-leading ideas, people, leaders vs. those that are better grounded/centered? What specific tools/insights/standards do you use?
- V. The good news in this passage is that while difficulties persist & are part of Creation & life – God is the Author of Life & holds us fast in an unwavering love & Grace for eternity. Keeping our focus on kingdom treasures & especially Jesus (who he was, what he taught, how he lived & interacted with others, the Promise of Salvation that he secured for all people) empowers us to live in confidence regardless of circumstances.

Some things to keep in mind:

- a. *We need to know that false shepherds exist & how to spot them or their ideas. Internet posting &/or repetition does not make something true.*
- b. *We need to know that faithfulness to God is not about buildings or portfolios regardless of their size. It's about relationship.*
- c. *We need to know that our faith is linear. Our faith is not circular. Life doesn't keep going round & round in meaningless & repetitious rounds of*

suffering & despair. Rather, it is headed toward a culminating point — a point about which we know very little. *There was a beginning, & there is an end point.* God is Alpha & Omega, beginning and end – and it all has purpose.

- d. *We need to know that there is no cause for alarm because of who has us not what we think we have earned or amassed that will protect us. This is what empowers us to be generous, gracious and free with who were are and what we have.*

(Thanks to Sundays&Seasons.com; homileticsonline.com; montreal.anglican.org)