

1 Samuel 1:4-20

1 Samuel 2:1-10

Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18) 19-25

Mark 13:1-8

Back in the Dark Ages, when I was in college, I had an Economics professor who made a profound statement in class one day that made an indelible impression on me. What he said was, "The only constant in life is change." Think about that. The only thing that we can count on about this life is that nothing will stay the same. I remember this statement not only because it is true, but because I didn't like it one bit! While change is constantly upon us, we human beings are hard-wired to resist it. We don't like change. We strive for permanence. We crave the familiar. We work really hard to get things just the way we want them only to discover that it doesn't stay that way for very long. We plan. We build. We rearrange. We dream. We labor to make our dreams a reality only to discover that all of it is fleeting. Just about the time we get things exactly the way we want them, something changes and we have to make adjustments. Our lives are constantly in motion and we find ourselves constantly creating and re-creating. Even our way of thinking about things is subject to change. When we get new information or some brilliant flash of insight, we are forced to let some other notion go...perhaps even a cherished, long-held belief. It's a bit unsettling.

We aren't the first human beings to be faced with unnerving and new information. Jesus was constantly and consistently providing his followers with new information...with a different perspective on things...and sometimes with blinding flashes of insight. In the Gospel reading this morning, we hear the disciples remarking on the grandeur of the Temple as they are leaving it. We can appreciate that because it was, indeed, a grand and magnificent structure. Built by King Herod to impress the wealthiest and most powerful rulers of the day, the Temple...the closest physical place (the Jews believed) that anyone could get to God...was indeed impressive. The disciples were not the only ones who gazed on it with wonder and admiration. And when we think of the grand religious structures of our lives...our own National Cathedral, Notre Dame in Paris, the Taj Mahal in India, St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow, the Great Synagogue in Budapest and Westminster Abbey in London...it's hard to imagine them as heaps of rubble. But that's exactly what Jesus predicted. "Not one stone," he said, "will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." It's not hard to imagine the shock and dismay and even sadness that the disciples must have felt when they heard these words.

The gospel of Mark was written just about the same time that the Temple in Jerusalem was, in fact, destroyed in 70CE. It was about 35 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, so this would have been a very meaningful prediction from Jesus for the original listeners to this gospel. They knew that such a thing could happen. They had witnessed it themselves. But there's much more to Jesus' prediction than the destruction of the Temple itself. Jesus wasn't just talking about physical structures. Jesus was also talking about social structures that had been created by humans. Just as the Temple was maintained by a hierarchy of religious officials who preyed on widows and the disadvantaged and the poor, so all the other social structures built by human beings are riddled with sin and ripe for injustice and oppression. We know this to be true in our own age and in our own society. Every day that dawns brings us new information about corruption in high places, injustice to the disadvantage, and murder and mayhem woven into the very fabric of our daily lives. We can see it around us every day as we strive to put into play all the teachings of Jesus that call to us to assist the poor, to forgive the transgressor, to work for justice for all people, to love our enemies as we search for peace and to be kind as a matter of course. Jesus sends us out into the world telling us to be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves as we work to be partners with God in the coming of His kingdom.

But we also know that all human attempts to create God's kingdom on earth...to create a utopia...are doomed to failure. Throughout the ages every attempt that humans have made to create the 'perfect' society and social structure has met with dismal failure. Those experiments in perfection among humans have revealed our utter sinfulness. They have shown us humanity's inability to create the kingdom of God here on earth. Our human sin permeates every social structure we put in place. Only God can create the utopia we dream of. It will be done in God's time and only by God's creation. And like us, the disciples are anxious to know when this will happen. "What are the signs?" they ask. "How will we know when these things are about to be accomplished?"

Jesus' description of the destruction that will happen when the end of the world occurs is alarming. None of us want to hear about the earthquakes, the tsunamis, the wildfires, the hurricanes, the floods and nation rising up against nation. But we experience all of those things now...in the present...in our own lives and in recent history. We need to remember that God's timing and our sense of time are different. We experience death and destruction in our lifetime and in our world, but destruction is a necessary part of creation. All of us know that in our own attempts at creation on a small scale. You have to break an egg or two to make an omelet. You have to cut a fabric in order to sew a garment. You have to tear up a room in order to re-model it.

What we look forward to is a world in which none of these destructive things happen...and we all long for that world. Anyone who has ever experienced the death of a loved one longs for a time when death will be no more. Anyone who has ever lost everything yearns for the time when such loss will not occur. Anyone who has ever faced a life-threatening injury or illness longs to be free from such tragedy and fear. Anyone who has ever suffered the injustice of an oppressive system that keeps a few people in prosperity and many others in poverty looks forward to a time when that can never happen. Anyone who has ever known the randomness of catastrophe seeks the comfort of absolute safety.

But there is absolute safety only in the center of things...and the center is God Almighty. We face the uncertainty of the world in which we now live with the hope of the world that will be when the kingdom of God is finally realized on the earth. The apocalypse is the end of all that stands between us and the sure safety of the reign of God. The destruction that we see...that we know...that we hear about each day...that we pray to be delivered from is only the beginning of the birth pangs of the new world that God is creating for the salvation of all of us: a world in which there is no destruction; there is no death; there is no injustice; and there are no unmet needs. It is a world in which there is no more weeping; a world where, as Isaiah predicted, they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will no longer take up the sword against nation, nor train anymore for war.

This is what Jesus' prediction is all about...a world the way God intended it to be. It is the promise of God for the salvation of the world. We experience now all the destruction that Jesus predicted and we know that what we seek with great anticipation is the world that God will create for us. We need not fear the destruction of the world we know. We need only to look forward to the world that God has prepared for us. "Do not be alarmed." Jesus says. And we know that Jesus does not mislead us or lie to us.

We have no memory of the world from whence we came, but we arrived in this world safely. We do not know about the world to which we will go, but we have no reason to believe that we will not arrive there safely as well. For the Lord God created us, loves us, and has prepared a place for us.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.