

As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him,

"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."

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately,

"Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?"

Then Jesus began to say to them,

"Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For 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 of the birth pangs."

Mark 13:1-8

I can still remember my first trip to New York City. I grew up in a small town in northeast Pennsylvania. I think the tallest building in Hawley is three stories high. (Maybe there is a four-story building there, but if there is I just can't quite picture it!) People of all ages come from small towns and walk around New York City looking up. You can't help it. It's instinctive. I see the disciples and Jesus—small-town fishermen in the big city in the same way. "My goodness," they say to Jesus, "look at these great big buildings!"

Jesus remembers his history, though. I don't think he's making a prediction about the future so much as that he knows that nothing lasts forever. Six centuries before his birth, the people of Jerusalem felt invincible—or at least they did until the Babylonian army marched into town and reduced those big buildings to rubble. That of course marked the beginning of the exile.

Human resiliency is a very good thing. But the downside of "moving on" is that people can forget. People can suffer from amnesia. Five hundred years is a long time. Just think back to the founding of this country and then go back at least that far again. Back to a time before even the Pilgrims arrived on these shores. Back to the decade or so after Columbus first came to the new world. That's how long it'd been since the temple had been rebuilt under Ezra and Nehemiah. So as the disciples walk around Jerusalem it's easy to see how they would be impressed. Not only is it as grand as ever, but it seems like it's been there forever as well.

Yet within four decades, the Romans will march into Jerusalem and destroy that second temple just like the first one was destroyed. In fact this one will never be rebuilt. All that remains to this day of it is the west wall—more commonly called the Wailing Wall. By the time Mark's Gospel is actually written down that event is almost imminent—it's probably just a year or two away.

Yet the point is as I said already not so much that Jesus is making a prediction, but that he invites his disciples in every generation to consider that nothing lasts forever. Big buildings make us think we are secure—and maybe even invincible. But we know better, don't we? The biggest of buildings can become rubble in no time at all. And when that happens, when things we thought were “permanent” are exposed as transient, they can leave fear and terror in their wake. What do we do with that?

Well, what Jesus does in today's gospel reading is to re-frame it. Endings, he says, always hold within them the possibilities for new beginnings. The loss that Israel will experience with the destruction of the temple is real. Yet Jesus says within that loss one can find the “birth pangs” of a new creation.

Most of us like security. Big buildings make us feel secure. But there is no homeland security program good enough to keep us 100% safe. Jesus is reminding us of our vulnerabilities. We think if we make it bigger and stronger that it stops being part of creation, but that isn't so. In the absence of absolute security there is a clear but difficult choice: to live in fear or with trust.

So Jesus doesn't confuse these big urban buildings—the temple in this case—for God. Temples are built and destroyed. When they are destroyed it is scary because our precariousness is exposed. But there is also the possibility of exposing our trust as misplaced in the first place when that happens, and therefore a new opportunity to turn to God, to love the Lord our God with our whole heart and to have no other gods before us.

In the past few decades the institutional church has experienced quite a few hits. It feels as if the foundations are shaking and the buildings may yet come crashing down. The response in many quarters tends to be one of high anxiety. You see it in the faces of clergy and bishops especially. But notice what Jesus says—it's as true today as it was 2000 years ago. In the face of anxiety people crave easy answers. In the face of anxiety is when people are led astray because everyone wants to speak in the name of Christ. “I am he.”

But it is in precisely those moments—in the midst of the beginning of the birth pangs—that true faith is possible: faith as trust in Jesus Christ, not in anything else. Not the Anglican Communion, not the Episcopal Church, not St. Francis or Rich Simpson, God forbid. But in the One who has come into the world to make all things new.

I see the Church as a wonderful and sacred mystery, I truly do. I am the kind of person who needs a community of persons to gather for my faith to take hold and to grow and be nurtured and stretched. I wouldn't do well with just a small group of like-minded people gathered in some small group. Not only because of my ordination vows but because of who I am as a child of God, I am committed to building up the Church because I love the Church even when I see its warts and I am driven nearly insane by the pettiness and silliness of others who claim to love it also.

But I say this as just such a person: the Church is not God! It is no more to be equated with God than the temple in Jerusalem was. It can fall to the ground, to rubble, and God will still be God. And that I think is the whole point of today's gospel reading.

Strangely, that can be both comforting and freeing. Because right now there is enormous energy being expended in some quarters on trying to hold things together that, quite frankly, may need to pull apart for a while. Jesus doesn't need the Anglican Communion—or dare I say even the Episcopal Church—to be Jesus. If all of our energy is all about institutional preservation then our energy is misplaced. That doesn't mean we don't care for this parish or tend to the needs of the diocese or the national church or the Anglican Communion. It just means that we need to recognize all of these things for what they are: as means to an end. They are all human things that point toward the living God; they are not in and of themselves God. If they are furthering the Gospel they serve a purpose; and if they cease to further the Gospel then they may as well fall apart so something new can emerge.

All of that is beyond my own purview and control. (And your's too!) But I can tell you this: I truly believe that what we are seeing even as the foundations shake are the birth-pangs of something new and glorious. God's new creation is in our very midst. And I think our mission is to tend to that new creation. I think our work here is to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ: good news for the world—for us and for our neighbors. Our job is to invite people in, to make space here for those who are hungry for a word of grace. We need buildings and staff to do that work—but always we need to be called back to the fact that the work itself is not about us, but about the One we serve. We are a people who are called to see in every ending a new beginning. And to be a people of hope and encouragement rather than of fear and anxiety.

Now today is the culmination of our fall giving campaign. We are called to good stewardship all year long. But in November we focus on our financial needs: on what we need to give back to God to do this work we feel called to do. As November comes to an end and we celebrate Thanksgiving, the Stewardship Committee passes the baton to the Finance Committee as we allocate the pledges and prepare a budget for the Vestry to consider in January. It looks like this is going to be a very good year. We are all indebted to those who have worked so hard to make this a good year, including Laura Caswell and the entire Stewardship Committee. But we can all be thankful for each other—for the incredible generosity of this parish year in and year out—for those who believe in the work we are doing together—always with God's help.

Our giving is a response to what God has already done in Jesus Christ. We don't give to gain power, or influence, or bragging rights. We don't give (or not give) as a way of evaluating the rector or as a means of trying to exert control. We give because Jesus gave his life for the world—and for us. We give so that together we might tend to the new creation he ushers in. Our money is just one small part of that response.

Sometimes our gifts may seem scant or insufficient—maybe even meager—in the face of the enormity of the world's needs. But we pray today that as our gifts are gathered and offered in God's love, they will indeed prove to be enough—enough for us to be for one another and the world around us signs of that new life in Christ. We pray that people might look at St. Francis Church and know that there are birth pangs here of God's new creation—and that in seeing that they (and we) might put their trust where it belongs: in the One who truly is our rock and our salvation. Amen!