

Mark 13:1-10

Rocks

What is it like to be living in Palestine, Ukraine, the Gaza strip or Lebanon right now? The other night as I watched the evening news, images were being flashed across the screen of areas of each of these places and the absolute decimation of buildings from shops to apartment buildings, hospitals and infrastructure. I simply could not comprehend what I was seeing. Even as people were shown hungry and homeless, that fact that I have never experienced such chaos makes it impossible for me to understand the depth of fear and anguish, anger and loss.

I am completely ill equipped to imagine so much destruction of people and property.

I feel somewhat like the disciples who, just having visited the Temple in Jerusalem with Jesus in the story from Mark, take a moment to point to the large stones and large buildings, point it all out to Jesus. They are awestruck by its massive strength. The temple represented the presence of God with people. It was amazing. It was the centre of the Jewish peoples' faith and was their assurance that God was with them. It was large, ornate, and seemed like one of the only stable things in their world.

This was a time of Roman occupation in Jerusalem. If you recall, it is the Romans who put Jesus to death on a cross. Though the temple stood at that in the time of Jesus, any hint of rebellion was quashed, be it Jesus or anyone else who posed a threat. The population and territory were occupied territory. Yet, even in those circumstances the temple represented the stability of God's presence. So as the disciples admire the temple, they expect Jesus to say, "Yes, isn't it amazing, it will last forever, it reminds us that God will never leave." Instead, he says, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

Now there are some people present here or who may read this sermon and understand what it is like to have everything they have know come to an end. There are people from what was Burma who have made their home in Thunder Bay and other places in Canada. The Karen Congregation that bought First Presbyterian on Walsh Street were refugees who continue to bring over people from Myanmar who are under threat of violence, destruction, and death. The first refugees arrived in Thunder Bay just over 30 years ago and the work continues.

There are many Ukrainians who have found new homes in Canada in the last two years as their country has fought a war against Russia. Yet this is not the first time the Ukraine has experienced so much loss. Over the last century there have been waves of

Ukrainians who have found a place of peace in Canada when their own country was at risk and at war.

As we just commemorated Remembrance Day this past Monday, I know there are those who, though not coming from a place of destruction in Canada, experienced huge losses and saw the aftermath of bombs and fire power.

So now put yourself in the position of the disciples, it is not that hard to do really. Everything they have understood about God and God's presence with the Jewish people is resting on this final symbol, the Temple, similar to how one might feel about this grand edifice that is St. Andrew's here in the centre of the south core of Thunder Bay. And Jesus says to them, "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." Think about this church gone, not just empty, but destroyed, in order to get yourself in the same mindset as the people Jesus was speaking with.

A while later there is an opportunity for Peter, James, John, and Andrew to ask Jesus privately, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" And the answer is not a straight forward one. The reply, "Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁶Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. ⁷When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. ⁸For 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 birthpangs."

Let's put this writing into context. Once again, we need to remember that the gospels are not a play by play of Jesus at work in the moment. This particular gospel of Mark was likely written some forty years after Jesus' death, and most scholars would say that it was not written until after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Yes, that temple that the Jewish people revered as the home of God was destroyed when the Jewish people under Roman rule revolted. The Romans decimated them and everything the people held as sacred.

Mark was writing after all of this as he tells the story of Jesus to people of his own time. These were people who had experienced the worst that the Romans could do. This was a time of people being thrown to the lions for sport. Just as today it is hard to imagine the pain and suffering of the people around the globe that are living through the hell of war, if we have not ourselves experienced that particular kind of hell, we also cannot imagine what the Jewish people were going through at that time. Realizing that the Romans didn't give a hoot about whether you were a Christian Jew or the original. All were considered the same. All suffered. Mark tells us that Jesus said that individuals and nations would suffer.

So where the heck is the Good News in this?

I was reading a sermon by Diana Butler Bass. She is an American historian of Christianity, but also in many ways a political analyst. She talks about the Gospel of

Mark as the gloomy gospel. There doesn't seem to be much hope here only challenges. Mark is also devoid of any birth narrative. When it comes to Christmas, we don't get any of the story from Mark. Mark dives right in with John and Baptist and Jesus' baptism. At that time, right after Jesus comes through the temptation in the wilderness, Mark writes that the first words from Jesus are a proclamation, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:15)

The world continues to go through times of nations rising against nations, natural disasters, and famines. Mark wrote to the people of his time to let them know that though they were going through terrible, unthinkable, craziness, that this was not the final word for the world. For ourselves we see what is going on in the world, we see now Israel being a superpower over others whose lives they are now decimating. We see governments across nations and little kingdoms of drug cartels around the world persecuting those whose lives are in the balance.

In our own country we see our structures failing us, from governments, to health care, education, and the equity of all people. We watch as churches succumb to a world that no longer sees faith in God as a viable option. In fact viewing those of us who continue to believe as foolish and holding on to antiquated ideas.

Then we hear from Mark, "This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." (v8)

Just this past Friday I was sharing about when I was pregnant with my second child. I was only days away from giving birth and ended up watching a program where a woman was in labour. Suddenly I panicked as I had forgotten about that part. The labour part from my first child. It is a gift from God that we forget about the labour pains as no one would have another child if that was what we remembered, but in that moment of watching another woman giving birth I remembered it all. The pain, the memory of it rushed back on me and I became afraid. Too late though! This baby was ready and the pain was going to happen. Yet the beauty of what is birthed is worth it. In fact, I went on to have a third child.

Jesus says that all the destruction, the suffering is but the beginning of the birth pangs. These are the birth pangs of a new world, where God will dwell fully with people, death will be no more and mourning, and crying and pain will be no more. (Revelation 21:4).

We have no idea when this will happen, just as the people of Jesus time, and then Mark's time had no idea. It is not for us to know. What we are called to in the meantime is to remember that the large stones and buildings that we think will save us, will not. Those things of earth that we put our trust in are not going to last. This church may not last even as the Temple did not last. What has lasted is God's presence and compassion, God's promises and purposes. People are about destruction; God is about life.

The stones that we build our hopes and dreams on, from our work and home life, to our place of worship and our governments, all this is built on that which can be toppled over.

None of it is of lasting permanence. But God's presence is the rock, the stone, on which everything can be built on and trusted. God has left the building, but not the people. So when we worship here it is not the building we worship. This is a gathering place for the people of God who resides in them. The kingdom of God lives in each of us. That is what makes the church what it is.

God with us. This is what we celebrate as we anticipate Christmas and as we celebrate the coming season of Christmas. God with us was Jesus in a manger and now Jesus through the Holy Spirit living in us. This is the kingdom of God. This is the rock on which we stand. This is what is permanent. This is why we continue to gather in God's name. We have a story to tell to the nations, a story of Good News, that in and through Jesus God is with us. Now and forever. Amen.