



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, NOVEMBER 18, 2018,
DANIEL 12:1-3; PSALM 16; HEBREWS 10:11-25; MARK 13:1-8

CRUMBLING CONCRETE AND THANKFUL HEARTS

Mark 13:1-8 [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 birthpangs."]

Six years ago this month I held up a piece of concrete as a "show-and-tell" of the challenges we had with the exposed walls of the Cathedral. Because the lectionary is on a three-year cycle, this passage from Mark's gospel came around then, in 2012, as it does this year.

And Jesus said, "Not one stone of this temple will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." Hmmm.

While I am keenly joyful for the work we've done to preserve the building, for very good reasons, and we have done so faithfully I think, it is nevertheless still just a building. And someday it will fall.

So Jesus is asking us to consider what really matters in life.

We could leave it at that—the Church is the people, not the building, which is true, but if left at that, we would only scratch the veneer of meaning this passage holds for us.

There's good bible scholarship that says that this passage is really about one of two things: first, that Jesus was using the temple reference as a foreshadowing of his own death, and the cross was just around the corner, waiting for him, or secondly, that we know the gospel was written after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD and was intended as a source of encouragement for the early Christians who were suffering terribly.

Either way, it would serve as a prediction for that generation who just needed hope and encouragement to hang on, to hang in there, to have faith that the second coming of Christ was just around the bend.

But the second coming didn't happen in their lifetime; hasn't happened yet, and as best as I can tell, isn't on the foreseeable horizon at this point in history either. So what else can we glean here?

It seems to me that when times are bad, there's a lot more murmuring about the end times, about the world falling apart or coming to an end, and religious people will often try to frame that within some narrative of reassurance that God will make things alright for those who are "on board" with the program.

That's the thread sewn into the "Left Behind" series of books and movies, where the faithful get raptured out, leaving the unrighteous behind. It's an adaptation of the old saying: "God knows who's been naughty or nice...so you better watch out."

Let me be clear, this is a gross misappropriation of the Christian Hope that never intended us to opt out of our time and place, but precisely the opposite—to live faithfully in it, which is the deeper gleaning of this passage.

Fred Craddock once said, "Maybe people are obsessed with the second coming, because, deep down, they were really disappointed in the first one."ⁱ

Jesus didn't come along and make everything alright. We still have wars, and famines, devastating fires, and earthquakes; indeed, people are still being crucified by the powers that be.

And Jesus says all of that just is. Be aware of it, but be faithful in the face of it. He never said opt out of it. He never said look past it.

A couple of years ago I taught a series on Authentic Happiness, drawing on the groundbreaking research of Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania.ⁱⁱ

Across more than three decades of research, Seligman has been exploring how people experience positive emotions differently and the impact those experiences have on their

well-being, health and even longevity. These positive emotions include joy, flow, glee, pleasure, contentment, serenity, hope and ecstasy.

It turns out there is a positive correlation in the statistics: The more positive emotions are embraced, the better health and well-being is experienced. Even longevity is enhanced.

Some people seem to be able to live more of life shaped by these positive energies than others, even while they face similar trials and tribulations. They seem to have positive emotion in abundance, and this translates into a life guided by the gift of gratitude.

A grateful heart paints a different rendering of the worst of times. It frames the bad in context with what is good. Again, not opting out or looking past the bad, but how do we connect with the good. Here's the secret sauce: it's the practice of gratitude. I think it is the most important work we have—practicing gratitude.

Here's how it comes together:

The positive emotions—joy, pleasure, serenity, and the like—fold into a spiritual path that leads to wisdom, courage, love, justice, and other virtues.ⁱⁱⁱ

And these virtues practiced over and over, habituate into gratitude for the connections we share with the universe. Gratitude is the connector, the glue for us to experience life in the contexts of relationships, with God,

others, and the entire universe. It is the way God designed the universe, the way God designed us.

Jesus didn't know a thing about this modern science of positive psychology, but he knew people were hurting, as they are still today, and he knew that his life, his death, his resurrection would not instantly make all the trials and tribulations of the world evaporate.

What he also knew is the buildings are not the defining element of a religious community—the people who gather in God's name are the defining element, because the chief purpose of our existence is to experience gratitude/connection.

Or to say it another way: this is not the church; you and I are the church, and whether this building stands or falls, we are invited to live along this path of connection, of community, such that the way we live transforms not only our lives, but transforms the world.

That is what religion is really intended to do—to frame life in a way that we can find goodness here and hope for the future.

The kingdom of God—now and not yet.

This is why we say we are made in God's image, claimed as part of creation which is inherently good, as worthy, as beloved. And surely we can say that the natural response to this reality is simply gratitude.

That doesn't make life a walk in the park. Buildings crumble, wildfires happen, people die. Our loved ones die, and we hurt each other, and others hurt us, and there are days when the whole world seems to be going to hell in a hand basket.

But even on those days, even when times seem darkest, we can be assured that God is here with us, that Jesus hangs on the cross in solidarity with our suffering, and we can stake our claim that God has suffused this universe with enough goodness and love and

joy and gladness that we have within us some of those elemental particles of the Spirit too.

There is enough here and now. No need to opt out or give up.

Live life today as if God is with you.

Live life today as if you care about this world more than the next.

Live life today as if you can make a difference, because you can. You do. You will. Amen.

ⁱ As cited by Robin Meyers, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2005>

ⁱⁱ Martin Seligman's book is entitled "Authentic Happiness."

ⁱⁱⁱ Of course, these are not new virtues, but have a long tradition of expression in Greek philosophical thought and in the Christian tradition.



Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!