

UNDIMMED BY HUMAN TEARS

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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Mark 13:1-8 (NRSV)

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" [2] Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

[3] When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, [4] "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" [5] Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. [6] Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. [7] When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. [8] 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.

AN EMPIRE FORGOTTEN

It's good to be back after a few weeks of vacation. Some of you asked me if I had a good time, and I replied, "I have found what I want to do with the rest of my life, eat and sleep all day in a warm place."

Actually, I did more than that on my vacation. At one point we visited some Mayan ruins.

Like many people I hadn't paid much attention to that part of history, but this trip really peaked my interest. We drove for an hour straight into the jungle to get to these ruins; they were giant pyramid like structures that were surrounded by dense forest. The guide used our travel time to fill us in on the history of his people. (He himself was a descendant of the Mayans.)

Just before the time of Christ, the Mayans had a thriving civilization in the jungles of the Yucatan peninsula, and it continued until about 900 AD. Their astrological calculations allowed them to create a calendar that is much more accurate than the one we use. They had a fully developed system of writing and math. The culture and achievements of this civilization was truly amazing.

Their buildings are impressive even in their ruined state, but when you begin to understand what they looked like in all their glory, covered in red stucco and stretching toward the sky, you cannot help but be intrigued by such a mighty and proud people.

And yet, the Mayans began to abandon their cities around 958 AD. For a long time this was a great mystery. Some even suggested that aliens came and took them away in their space ships. But, it turns out that the abandonment of their towns was due more down to earth problem. Their farming techniques eventually ruined the land, and they had to move elsewhere in order to survive.

The grand old temples and home sites were eventually recaptured by the jungle. Mayan books were destroyed by the invading Spanish armies. And a once glorious culture was abandoned for many, many years. Now we know that there are thousands of sites of archeological interest, but the money to excavate these sites is limited.

Can you imagine a whole civilization lost for so many years? The accomplishments of so many people were forgotten. As I watched a line of army ants make their way through what used to be a booming marketplace it caused me to wonder about our own civilization.

Even those structures that we think are strong and permanent are temporary and fleeting. Though we try our best to preserve the history and traditions of our people, there comes a time in life when we realize that many in our society do not care about the past. Even our greatest achievements are eventually doomed to destruction and decay.

I am reminded of that pessimistic preacher from the Old Testament book, Ecclesiastes who wrote that generations come and go but nothing really changes. The same fate befalls the wise man that befalls the fool. Death is the great equalizer. Everything is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Our technology may improve, but human beings remain the same, trusting in monuments that are here today and gone tomorrow.

I think that was the point that Jesus was trying to make in our lesson for today. Temples are here today and gone tomorrow. Even the most magnificent building can be destroyed in an instant.

UNDIMMED BY HUMAN TEARS?

We certainly learned that several years ago. What used to be the tallest buildings in the world, symbols of power and prestige, lay in ruins after an act of terrorism. Even though we saw it with our own eyes on television, it is still hard to believe that such a thing could happen. It was a shock to our system. We didn't realize how much we needed those symbols of power and stability.

Several days after 9/11 there was a worship service in the National Cathedral to mourn the loss of those killed. After a sermon by Billy Graham, the congregation sang a familiar national hymn, "O Beautiful for Spacious Skies." The television commentators were struck by the irony of the last line. It goes, "O beautiful for patriot dream that sees beyond the years. Thine alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears."

At that time, the city was not gleaming and tears were the order of the day. What we thought would last for many years now lay in ruins, and more importantly so did our confidence about the future. I think we should look at our lesson for today through the lens of our emotions after 9/11. The fear and uncertainty that we felt during that time would very much match the fear and uncertainty that abounded during Jesus' day.

THE TEMPLE

It is hard for us to understand how important the holy city Jerusalem and the Temple were for the ancient Israelites. The Temple represented who they were and what they believed. The Temple represented the presence of God and God's favor. In Jesus' day the Temple was truly one of the most impressive sights in the world.

You might remember that the Temple had been torn down twice before this time. The original Temple built by Solomon was destroyed when God's people were taken into captivity by the Babylonians. A new Temple was built when the people returned from the Exile, but it was much smaller in size and scope and was a disappointment to many, especially the older folks who remembered the glory of the first Temple.

The people didn't care much for King Herod who was a turncoat and who cooperated with the Romans. So, in order to win the favor of the people he began to build a new Temple. This Temple was begun before the birth of Jesus, and it would not be totally completed until after his crucifixion. So when Jesus talked about the Temple, he was talking about a brand new building.

It was a staggeringly opulent building. The perimeter of the building was two thirds of a mile. The marble walls stood 150 feet high. These blocks of marble weighed many tons. The outside of the building was decorated with 40 foot high columns of white marble.

There were ten gates by which to enter the temple's outer courts. Each of the doors was covered with silver or gold plate. Two of the doors stood 45 feet high. One gate, known as the Beautiful Gate was cast in Corinthian bronze.

The gleaming white marble and stunning metal work made the temple flash in the Middle Eastern sun. It dominated the city. The Temple was the heart of the city, and the heart of the Jewish people.

If you had been with Jesus and his disciples as they left the Temple long ago and had looked at the gleaming structure, you would have said exactly what the disciples said, "Look at those stones! How in the world did they ever create such a massive and wondrous building?"

JESUS' REPLY

Plans are already made to put a magnificent building on the site where the World Trade Center used to be located. We can imagine the dedication ceremony on the day that building is completed. People will gaze with wonder into the sky and remember all the hard work and tears that went into the construction of that building.

But, can you imagine the consternation and even anger of the crowd if someone would say something like this at the dedication, "You know that this building is not going to last forever. Someday, perhaps someday soon it will be completely destroyed." The FBI would have that person in their headquarters in an instant. It would be sacrilege to say such a thing at a time like that.

And it was treated the same way when Jesus said as much about the beautiful new Temple long ago. The disciples said, "Look at those stones." And Jesus said, "Yes, look at those stones. Take a good look because all of these great buildings will be destroyed. Not one stone will be left here upon another. All will be thrown down."

Apparently there were several people who heard what Jesus had to say that day. They even brought it up at his trial before they crucified him. It was this statement that was the basis of their case against him. (Mark 14:58)

What Jesus said did come true. The Temple was destroyed not too many years later. In 70 AD the people revolted against the Romans. The Romans laid siege to the city, and according to the Jewish historian, Josephus over a million people died of starvation before the city was laid waste. (By the way, the gospel of Mark was written around 70 AD so you can see how this passage would have been of vital interest to the people of that time. When they remembered what Jesus said it was of comfort to them. Even though the Temple falls, the Spirit of the Living God as revealed in Jesus continues.)

A GOOD FOUNDATION

But, I think that Jesus' prediction was not so much about the destruction of the physical Temple. It was about the foundation of true faith.

The Temple appeared to be indestructible; it had adequate structural foundations. But, the religious system was on shaky ground.

The important thing is not the size of the building in which we worship or the prestige of its members. The important thing is the purity of our doctrine. Are we worshipping God in Spirit and in Truth? Does our faith have a strong foundation? Will we be able to stand up to the storms that will inevitably come our way?

Remember the parable Jesus told about the two men who were building a house? One built his house on a foundation of sand. The rain came. The waters rose. And the house collapsed.

The other man built his house upon a rock. The rain came. The waters rose. And the house stood because it was situated on a firm foundation.

And what is a firm foundation? According to Jesus, a firm foundation is hearing his words and acting upon them. A firm foundation is following in the footsteps of Jesus, doing what God would have us do as revealed in the life of Jesus. When we work for peace and justice, we do what is required of us in the name of Christ. We lay a firm foundation.

When we build our life upon religious ritual and personal pride, no matter how big the stones or how often we pray it will do us no good. We can cry “Lord, Lord” all we want to, but unless our life shows that Jesus is Lord, our cries do no good. Our “temple” will not stand up to the strain of life’s storms. (Matthew 7:24-27)

In the Middle Ages, St. Dominic made a pilgrimage to Rome. Pope Innocent III took him on a tour of the gilded, opulent Lateran basilica of St. John. Alluding to the reply of Peter and John to the lame man in Acts 3:6, the pope boasted, “No longer need we say ‘Silver and gold have I none.’”

But, the humble Dominic answered, “Yes, and at the same time the church can no longer say, ‘Rise up and walk.’”

Whenever the church is overly concerned about magnificent buildings and great sums of money, spiritual power is lost. The foundation of faith is lost when we build upon the quicksand of fleeting glory.

CRUCIFY THE OLD WAY OF LIFE

Frederick Buechner wrote,

“Maybe the best thing to happen to the church would be some great tidal wave of history to wash it all away ... the church buildings tumbling, the church money all lost, the church bulletins blowing through the air like dead leaves, the difference between preachers and congregations all lost too.

Then all we would have left would be each other and Christ, which was all there was in the first place.”

Sometimes false hopes have to die before a true hope can live. As Jesus was crucified and raised from the dead, so we have to be crucified with Christ; we have to die to the old way of life and be raised to a new way of living. The apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians,

“... and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Galatians 2:20 (NRSV)

The Bible tells us that Jesus is the cornerstone of a new temple. (Mark 12:10; Acts 4:11; Ephesians 2:20; I Peter 2:6-7) The cornerstone was used as a base to make sure the other stones of the building would be straight and level.

In the same way, Jesus’ life, death and resurrection would be the church’s foundation. Jesus would be the design for a new living building.

It would be a living building. This building would not be made up of large stones. This building would be made up of people, the people who through the ages have lived for the glory of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul talked about this new temple when he wrote a letter to the Ephesians. In Ephesians 2:19-22 Paul wrote,

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, [20] built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. [21] In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; [22] in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”

A CHURCH FALLS AND RISES

It was Palm Sunday 1994 in Piedmont, Alabama. The minister remembered a conversation she had with her five year old daughter on the way to church. She asked her mother, “Will you, Daddy, Sarah and me all die at the same times?” Her mom answered, “We may not all die at the same time. But, I believe we’ll be together again.”

The little girl said, “When you die, you get buried. After that you go to live with God.” The minister answered, “That’s right honey.” She wondered why her daughter was talking about such things, but with the exuberance of a five year old, she soon was talking about other things.

The small church was filled to capacity that day. But, during the service the unthinkable happened. The sanctuary was totally devastated by a tornado. The minister was knocked out by flying debris, and when she awoke not much was standing.

She made her way toward the front pew where Hannah was seated. She was lifeless. They took her to the hospital in the ambulance while the minister tried to comfort her congregation ... many of who had lost loved ones. In all that day, twenty people from the church died and eighty seven were injured. One of the dead was the minister’s five year old daughter, Hannah.

They had funerals all week, that week before Easter, and the minister wondered if the church could go on. She imagined that those who survived might lose their faith, their ability to worship. She said to herself, “There’ll be no more Goshen Church. It’s gone.”

But, later that week the phone began to ring. People were wondering if they were going to have an Easter Sunday service. These were the same people who had lost loved ones or had been injured. The minister wrote, “I knew they were thinking about what happened to Jesus on the cross and what happened to our church, and they were longing for Easter.”

So they decided to have a sunrise service right on the lawn beside the church that was now a pile of rubble. She said, “We’ll be out there at dawn waiting for Easter.” On Thursday she awoke with a passage of Scripture in her head, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life ... nor things present, nor things to come ... nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Despite having a broken heart, reading those words began a healing process in her life and in the life of the church she served. On Easter morning she waited in the cool dawn with 200 other people. She stepped up to the podium and said, “I can’t think of any other place I would rather be. Can you?”

After the sermon on the passage that touched her heart, she saw the tear stained faces of her parishioners, and then she knew ... Goshen church would go on. One year later they broke ground for a new church building, a building that would be in the shape of a butterfly, the symbol of resurrection and new life.

Not one stone of that old church was left undisturbed. Many loved ones had been killed or injured in that disaster. And yet the power of God in Christ was strong enough to hold that congregation together. It wasn't about reconstructing a building. It was about the power of a resurrection faith that stood up to even the worst of tragedies.

One day this beautiful old church building will be gone. One day we and all we love will be gone.

But, not forever.

Forever belongs to our Lord. And so do we.

Amen.

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH](#)

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