

Year B, Pentecost 25, Proper 28b

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Mark 13:1-8

Undermining the World Order

When Jesus and his disciples left the Temple, “one of his disciples said to him, ‘Teacher, look! What awesome stones and buildings!’” The building was a magnificent architectural structure containing huge stones, cut to fit, that elicited awe and a sense of national pride. The Temple was the crown jewel of Jewish culture, the rallying point for their ambition to be self-governing and free of Rome; The place where God lived in their midst as they saw it. For years zealous groups had organized in defense of Jewish culture and been crushed by the Roman military. But they continued, each group more determined than the last until Jerusalem was finally destroyed in 70 A.D.

While in the Temple, Jesus had gathered his disciples and in the story of the Widow’s mite explained the economic relationship between poverty, exploitation and the flaunting of the powerful. Now, in walking out of the Temple, a disciple points to the extravagant building the widow’s mite had paid for and Jesus is not impressed.

Jesus says, “Do you see these enormous buildings? Not even one stone will be left upon another. All will be demolished.” Our imaginations conjure up a scene from one of those apocalyptic movies so popular now. Complete devastation! Incomprehensible destruction! God’s wrath finally descending! Is this what Jesus meant?

Jesus moves across the Kedron Valley to the Mount of Olives opposite the Temple where they sit down. Jesus wants his disciples to see the Temple in a new way. But the disciples bring a complex set of theological meanings to the building and think he’s describing God’s final judgement on the Jewish people. Jesus isn’t thinking theology (what God will do), he is thinking history and anthropology (what humans do). Jesus and his disciples are on very different wave lengths. Jesus doesn’t believe all this God-is-violent-stuff but how does he get his disciples to see that humans are the dangerous ones; not God?

“Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ‘Tell us, when will these things happen? What sign will show that all these things are about to come to an end?’” They are thinking of a bloody and violent end of the world scenario brought on by God in the imagined battle of good versus evil. Their heads spin with images of destruction while their bodies tighten with anxiety.

I wonder why these four disciples don’t discuss this openly in the presence of the other eight disciples. Do they want special knowledge that gives them an advantage? We have Peter and Andrew, James and John, two sets of brothers, attempting to conspire with Jesus while leaving

the other disciples out. This is how it starts; the divisions that lead to conflict. Four disciples want an inside edge over against the other eight. Transparency goes out the window and it is suddenly us against them.

The four disciples pump each other's fears making them vulnerable to being deceived by anyone promising simple and easy solutions. Aware of their vulnerability, "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 most are anxious, someone will exploit that by offering themselves as savior. Don't listen to them. They will manipulate your fear to serve their own ends and everyone will be the worse for it.

Jesus goes on, "When you hear of wars and reports of wars, don't be alarmed. These things must happen." Why? Because this is what humans do. This is not apocryphal, not about God, or any supposed judgement from God. God is not even involved in this. When those two planes flew into the Twin Towers and they fell with great loss of life that had nothing to do with God. That's just what happens when planes loaded with people and full tanks of jet fuel do when they fly into huge occupied buildings.

Jesus knows the destruction of the Temple won't have anything to do with God because God doesn't use wrath and violence. And when we think God does, we open ourselves to all kinds of violence, deception and exploitation. Wars and reports of wars are a human thing and God has no part in it.

Jesus hopes to remove their fears of earth-shattering, God-sponsored destruction in order to teach them the real causes of violence, war and famine. These things are human caused and preventable. Yes, these wars must happen because humans haven't learned how to manage their rivalry and don't see that all are loved children of God.

Meanwhile, the Gospel message centered in the cross and resurrection is flowing into the world and eroding the divisions humans use to siphon off tensions. Without these divisions that establish hierarchies, we have no way to establish who is on top and who is below. The divisions are breaking down and we find ourselves increasingly at each other's throats. That's what happens when the mechanism culture is built on gets exposed by the Son of God going to the cross to reveal a new culture based on love and forgiveness. The old way is being subverted by the Gospel and is increasingly no longer working but we don't know how to keep from falling into chaos without it. That's where we are in the trajectory of history. Jesus in this passage from Mark calls it the beginning of the birth pangs. It's a stage we humans must go through on our journey toward the end of a violence-based community followed by the coming in fullness of the Kingdom of God Jesus envisioned.

“Nations and kingdoms will fight against each other, and there will be earthquakes and famines in all sorts of places.” Earthquakes are geological events requiring we help each other and famines call us to share food, but there is no cosmic significance to these events, no divine punishment implied. It’s all mundane, common and tragic.

Three years ago, the night before Veteran’s Day, while writing the first draft of this sermon, a PBS program entitled “Iwo Jima: From Combat to Comrades” caught my attention. Japanese and American veterans from both sides, all old men now, met at Iwo Jima and we saw their common humanity as each side remembered with tears the friends they had lost there. The program after that was entitled “Debt of Honor: Disabled Veterans in American History.” The mental and physical cost of war, often hidden by popular sentiment and government decree, was powerfully revealed in interviews and video footage. More and more, we are seeing what we do to each other. The hidden victims are being exposed and it’s happening on television and other media. We are seeing the scapegoats in history and often we know them. Sometimes they are our children, grandchildren or friends. This revealing is the gospel at work in the world.

With the light of the gospel leading us, the human species must learn to see what before we were blind to; that we are more alike than we had ever dreamed. The gospel is teaching us that the West is not better than the East nor vice versa; that white is not better than black, nor vice versa; that one sexual orientation not superior to another nor vice versa. But if there are no dualities, with one being better and the other being worse, how do we compare ourselves? Can we live by grace and forgiveness and let go of all those comparative categories?

When the gospel teaches us we are all children of God, loved and recipients of forgiveness, it undermines the world’s order. It does so to bring this vicious and violent structuring of the world to an end. But the end is not what we think. It is not apocalyptic in the way the world uses that word. It is apocalyptic in the sense of the unveiling a truth so wonderful it’s hard to take in. In the gospels, the end is the promised beginning of the Kingdom Jesus brings where there are no tears, sorrow, suffering and death. This is not a kingdom reserved in Heaven, the sweet by and by. No, it’s coming toward us in real time, real space and being brought by Jesus himself. Jesus did say he would return as he left. He will return with a blessing and in quietness that the whole world will see. Thanks be to God.