

Not So Impressive After All

Mark 13:1-8

I know I've said it before but the disciples are to be forgiven for acting like country bumpkins, whether this was their first trip to the big city, or the 30th. Surely anyone who has stood at the foot of the Pyramids of Giza, or the Great Wall of China, or the Taj Mahal, or any one of the old cathedrals of Europe can imagine the awe they felt when they looked at the magnificent splendor of Solomon's Temple. It was far and away the most impressive thing any of them had ever seen, and would probably ever see, and rightfully so. The massive stones still visible at the Western wall only hint at its former glory – white marble, walls covered in sheets of gold so it burned brightly on Zion for miles around. It was not only the house of God, the place of worship, it stood as a testament to the ingenuity, creative, architectural and engineering skills of man. Its grandeur represented our best; our most brilliant, and most beautiful.

What's harder to imagine is what they must have thought and felt when Jesus said that it wouldn't be long and all of those massive stones would come crashing down. It would all lay in ruins, nothing more than a pile of rocks. The Temple wasn't just one building, it was a whole complex; huge, it took up acres and acres, and it was constructed of massive stones. It was like a fortress. How could anything that size, that solid, that unshakeable, that permanent, ever be destroyed? It would be like trying to imagine the Capital building in ruins. Almost impossible.

But it gets worse: Jesus wasn't simply predicting the Jewish revolt against the Roman Empire and the destruction of the glory of Jerusalem that would come some forty years later. He meant that it would all come crashing down. All those massive symbols of our greatness. All those things we thought would last forever, things that were too big to fail. Our monuments, our magnificent, towering buildings, our institutions. What Jesus was telling them was that eventually, everything great and glorious that we have created will come crumbling down around us. And not only our man-made wonders, but the very fabric of society, the fabric of the universe, even.

If the story of Ruth last week was a story of uncertainty, this is a tale of terrors. Apocalypse. Everything is coming unraveled.

People and nations will fight in more and more horrific ways.

Governments will fail.

Financial markets will topple.

People will starve.

Even the very forces of nature will seem to turn on us with their earthquakes, and draughts, and fierce and destructive storms.

Our best efforts come to naught, and our worst inclinations bring disaster and misery.

Jesus hasn't just predicted the end of a landmark; or the sacrificial system of religion. It wasn't even a hint that God's allegiance would shift from the Jews to the Christians. What he's warning them about is a coming time of suffering, a time of unrest. And indeed, Burton Mack, in his book, *A Myth of Innocence*, writes that the Jewish historian Josephus describes the end of the first century as a time "of famine, social unrest, intuitional deterioration, bitter internal conflicts, class warfare... intrigues, betrayal, [and] bloodshed." It was, indeed, a time of terror and suffering.

But as I read that it struck me that he might just as well have been describing our world right now, not the first century in Israel. He could just as easily have been describing a time when a single act of terrorism can not only bring down the very symbols of our financial strength, but bring a horrifying end to the lives of thousands of people, and traumatize an entire nation; or

when one cunningly dishonest man can make off with the life-savings of thousands, and it takes years for anyone to get suspicious. Or when the collective greed of a nation brings down its economy leaving hundreds of thousands of people homeless and jobless in its wake. Or when one lone, very sick and misguided gunman can take the lives of a roomful of people. What Jesus predicted, a time when everything we thought too big to fail fails – buildings, banks, companies, governments, our own lives – is happening all around us. It is, indeed, a time of terror and suffering.

And probably every age that has lived since Jesus uttered those words thought that he was talking about them and their terrors: the collapse of the Roman Empire. The Plague. The Civil Wars of Europe and the great wars of the world. Slavery. Terrorism. Katrina. AIDS. Cancer. Alzheimer's. Widowhood. People in every age have wondered if things could get any worse, and if the end was near. Is this what Jesus was talking about? Could this be the sign? Could we live with much more fear and anxiety and sadness?

For the most part Jesus always seemed like a glass-is-half-full kind of guy; glass is completely full, actually. The only time his nose ever got out of joint was when he was dealing with hypocrites. Fools he seemed to have a lot of heart for, but hypocrites? They got the full brunt of his ire. So it seems out of character that Jesus would go all doom and gloom on the disciples. The kingdom of God was at hand, remember? He was full of talk about the lame being healed and the hungry being fed, and now suddenly it's all catastrophe and apocalypse. The sky is falling, the sky is falling!

But that's our interpretation of apocalyptic literature. Too much Hollywood, perhaps. In scripture the purpose of apocalyptic literature wasn't to frighten innocent people into building bunkers underground and hoarding food, or to calculate the days until the end (by the way, in the Mayan calendar time runs out in 2012, according to a movie that was released this week) when we will all be consumed by the wrath of God. The purpose wasn't to get us to search the sky or the newspapers or the Weather Channel for signs of the end. In fact, all those predictions of failure and violence and collapse weren't supposed to elicit despair or panic at all. Jesus didn't say it was the end at all, did he? He said they were birth pangs. I just finished reading *The Time Traveler's Wife*, and in one part she's gone into labor and is having a terrible time of it, and turns to her husband to ask why it was that they were doing this. Because, he says, he's heard that when it's all over someone hands you a baby, and you get to take it home. Those signs weren't signs of the end. They were signs of a new beginning.

Jesus' words are a wake-up call. As we watch everything crumble into ruins around us –
 those things we thought were too big to fail have failed,
 disease claims the life of people we love,
 our financial footing shifts perilously underneath us –
 we are reminded in most unnerving ways that our bedrock, our foundation, is God. Not the banking system, not good health, not even our freedom or the institutional church. None of those is guaranteed. None of those will last forever. None of those can save us. They are all temporal, ultimately as shaky as those mighty stone blocks of the temple that the Jews assumed would stand forever. They are magnificent stones, but magnificent stones that collapse surprisingly easy.

Where is your hope? In your gainful employment? In your health? In being an American? In the Church? In your 401k? If it is, than we have only terror and suffering ahead of us. The only safe place to stand is under the outstretched arms of God. He will never let you be crushed by the falling stones when the walls come tumbling down.