

**Gospel & Sermon November 17, 2024:**  
**Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone**  
**“In the end, God never abandons us.”**



*This is a pangolin. When they feel threatened, pangolins curl up into a ball, face burrowed under their tail, leaving only their armor of scales exposed as protection. Sometimes, followers of Jesus do that, too.*

**Gospel: Mark 13:1-8**

*In the last week of his life, Jesus warned his disciples concerning trials that were to come upon them and upon the world. He exhorts the listener: Do not be alarmed.*

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 birth pangs.”

**Sermon by Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone**  
**“In the end, God never abandons us.”**

What do you do when you are afraid? Especially when you are afraid of what is happening in the world around you. If you were a pangolin, you'd curl up into a ball. They are some of God's more unusual creatures.

Pangolins are insect-eating mammals found in Africa and Asia, sometimes called scaly anteaters. If you can't remember what an anteater looks like, picture an armadillo, but with large scales that overlap like artichoke leaves. When they feel threatened, pangolins curl up into a ball, face burrowed under their tail, leaving only their armor of scales exposed as protection.

Sometimes, followers of Jesus do that, too.

In today's gospel story, one of those followers of Jesus has just turned everyone's attention to the glorious architecture of the temple. Look at those large stones! Look at those large buildings! Jesus, can you even ... ? I'm speechless.

It was a sight to behold, historians tell us. The temple was not just a place of worship but a tourist attraction. Herod the Great had refurbished the temple, with the goals of winning over dissident Jews and showing Rome just how important his corner of the empire was. Most of all, Herod wanted to impress the rich and the powerful of his day.

One Roman historian described the temple complex - with its giant, white marble stones and gold adornments, its fancy colonnades, courtyards, and balconies - as “a temple of immense wealth.” You look at something like that, and you figure it will last forever. And Jesus tells his disciples it will all come tumbling down.

And that's not all. There will be wars, and rumors of wars. Nations will rise against nations, and kingdoms against kingdoms. There will be earthquakes, and famines. And even that's not all. Jesus goes on to tell his followers that they will be handed over to councils, beaten in synagogues, and forced to testify before kings and governors. Families will be divided, with deadly consequences: A brother betraying his brother, parents betraying children, children rising up against parents.

It's enough to make you want to go home, lock your doors, pull the shades, and curl up into a ball until Jesus returns. That is what happens when we focus on the scary parts and read right past the promises.

It seems impossible, but Jesus promises us we will make it through even the most uncertain of times: "Do not be alarmed," he tells us. And later he assures us, "The one who endures to the end will be saved."

"They will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven." Life in the end times won't always be easy. It won't always be pleasant. But God will not abandon us. Yes, these stories are about the end. But Jesus assures us that the end is a beginning.

"This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." And birth pangs signal to us that something new is being born: The kingdom of God. The kingdom we have been waiting for. The kingdom Jesus has been revealing to us all along, as he healed the sick, cast out demons, welcomed outcasts and strangers, fed the hungry, and even raised the dead.

Apocalyptic literature, like we experience in today's reading from Daniel and in this 13th chapter of Mark, is not meant to scare us. It is written to encourage us. It was written to people who were suffering. Yes, the faithful will face trials and dangers. But endure! Trust that something new is being born. And birth is a messy process.

So how are we to endure? What are we supposed to do with this information? Some make predictions. They look at the world around them, scanning for wars and earthquakes and famines. They make complicated connections between books like Daniel and Revelation, and they state confidently: This is the end. Or the end is coming on this date.

But when have there not been wars and rumors of wars? When have there not been earthquakes and famines? In this chapter of Mark's gospel, Jesus says we will not know that day, and even he doesn't know that day. Predictions, Jesus tells us, are a waste of time.

So maybe it is best to make like a pangolin and curl up in a self-protective ball, or a self-protective building. And that makes me think of Luther's basic understanding of sin - humans curved in on themselves. Humans curved in on themselves, whether in pride or self-centeredness, in guilt or shame - they are of no good at all to their neighbors.

And I think the same goes for humans curved in on themselves in fear. When we exist in self-protection mode, we are of no good at all to our neighbors. It is hard to love our neighbors with our scales out and our tails covering our faces. So then what?

Well, maybe we sit with Jesus' story a little longer and let that be our guide. Don't be alarmed! Jesus says. Before the end comes, the good news must be proclaimed to all nations. When you're called to testify, think of that not as a risk but an opportunity. Something new is being born, and you will live to see it - whether in this life or the next.

So we do not curl up in fear. We open up in love and generosity, even when it's scary. We practice those things Jesus has taught us: healing; feeding; welcoming outcasts and strangers; casting out greed, injustice, racism, lust for power, and all the other demons harming our world.

And we open up to receive - to receive the good gifts that God has to give us, even when those gifts come with some kind of change that might also feel scary.

Jesus never promises us that the end will be easy or comfortable or predictable. But he promises us that the end is also a new and glorious beginning. So in the words we heard today from Hebrews:

"Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Pastor Jaime

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