

Wild Patience

Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:1-8, 28-37

First Sunday of Advent, (Nov. 29) 2020

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You hammer against the walls of your house. You tap the wall, lightly, everywhere... you know what to listen for. Some of the walls are bearing walls; they have to stay, or everything will fall down. Other walls can go with impunity; you can hear the difference. Unfortunately, it is often a bearing wall that has to go.... Knock it out. Duck. Courage utterly opposes the bold hope that this is such fine stuff that the work needs it, or the world.

- Annie Dillard,
The Writing Life

We build either toward life or toward death... It takes a discernment that can see when institutional operations are moving in the right direction, spiraling up toward life and away from death.

- Willie James Jennings,
After Education

A wild patience has taken me this far

- Adrienne Rich

Mark tells us that Jesus and his disciples are coming out of the Temple after he has been there teaching. This is during Jesus' last week before his arrest and crucifixion so the conflict with the religious and political authorities is building. Due to a comment by one of the disciples about how great and enduring the

Temple is Jesus responds with a teaching that one of these days this great building will be nothing but rubble.

For Jesus to prophesy that one day the Temple will be rubble was not simply disturbing to the disciples, it was mind-boggling, mind-blowing, and an out-of-his-mind kind of thing for Jesus to say. The Temple in Jerusalem, begun by Herod the Great about fifty years before this conversation between Jesus and his disciples, but likely still under construction and decoration, was considered the dwelling place of God. For the Jewish people of that day, the heart of God's presence and mission in the world was Israel – the Jews, and the heart of Israel was Jerusalem, and the heart of Jerusalem was the Temple, and the heart of the Temple, the very essence of God's presence, was the Holy of Holies deep in the middle of the Temple, separated from all else by a massive curtain.

Not only was the Temple the literal dwelling-place of God, it represented all who God was, and all that Israel believed. Their entire worldview, their socio-symbolic system of meaning, was encapsulated in the Temple. It was what sociologists term a “nomic structure.” Nomic comes from the Greek word “nomos” having to do with law, stability, order, and how everything is supposed to fit together. As a nomic structure it gave and represented coherence and harmony.

So, you see the Temple is more than a grand and impressive building. For Jesus to foretell that the Temple would be “thrown down” was as provocative as Jesus could be. Indeed, over in the next chapter, one of the accusations the religious leaders bring against Jesus in his trial leading to crucifixion, was that he foretold the destruction of the Temple (14:58).

Let me go on. Jesus says, “But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man (or the Truly Human One) coming in clouds’ with great power and glory...” He goes on, “Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come... And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake” (Mk. 13: 24-37).

Now, most likely Mark records all this roughly about 40 years later, somewhere during the late 60’s or early 70’s. He has Jesus’ words but he’s remembering them in his present context. And his context was during Nero’s persecution of Christians in Rome or shortly after it, and in Jerusalem and Judea it was the time of the Jewish Revolt against the Romans and the Roman counter-offensive to retake Jerusalem. Rome did retake Jerusalem in the year AD 70 and in so doing destroyed the city and destroyed the Temple, leaving nothing but smoking rubble and the western wall which we still have today. Mark is writing while he is witnessing the Jewish Revolt while he is also remembering what Jesus said at the Temple years before.

During the Jewish Revolt, Jewish Zealots were recruiting everyone and anyone to join the revolution against Rome. The Zealots said this was the moment of the messiah and the moment to recover the Temple from Rome and from those who work with Rome. For them this fight against Rome was when God’s anointed would come and set everything right. Jesus says in verses 21-23, that there will be false prophets saying that the messiah is coming or that the messiah is here! And Jesus says, “Don’t believe it... Be alert; watch out and don’t be taken in. Be discerning. Don’t believe everything they tell you. Don’t be taken in by what you see. Learn to see through the illusions.”

Rome is coming to retake the Temple and control it, and if they can't control it, they will destroy it. At the same time, Jewish Zealots and revolutionaries are fighting for the Temple to make it great again. They want to return to their former glory and when the messiah comes to lead the fight, all will go back to how it used to be. And in the middle of all this, Jesus is saying to his disciples, don't get sucked into the violent wars and rumors of wars, don't be taken in by the calls that the messiah is here. Don't fight to make the Temple great again. Instead, watch, discern, look for what God is doing. Join in God's work.

On the First Sunday of Advent, we always read these apocalyptic texts from the Gospels. Advent is always about preparation, getting ready, looking up and watching because God in Christ is coming. Advent is the call for us to open our TV tired eyes to what's really going on in this world. It is the call for us to move from watching the spectacle of whatever is on CNN and Fox and MSNBC or Hulu or Prime or Netflix to looking with a discerning eye at what's going on around us and in us and see in it and through it to what God is doing and saying. When we move from watching a spectacle to discernment then we are moving into an apocalyptic way of seeing. And that's the way most of the Bible and all of the Gospels think.

Apocalypse means revealing or unveiling. It means to see what has previously been hidden – to see the truth behind the bread and circuses and glitzy commercials and football games; to discern behind and through the sound bytes and official pronouncements. Usually, the apocalyptic comes in some sort of crisis. It comes in a crisis because it takes a crisis to shock us, perk us up to paying attention instead of living in a perpetual coma induced by the commercialized crap of our modern world.

The apocalyptic shocks us, unsettles us, so that we may have eyes open and hearts alerted to injustice, violence, racism, and fear while at the same time be given renewed hope in God's just kingdom of peace and healing and wholeness which is already beginning to break in around us.

Baptist theologian James McClendon, mentor and friend to me and friend to this church, used to say that in reading the Bible, and especially in reading these apocalyptic passages in the Gospels, we must learn to read with tri-focal lenses. We read in the context of when it was written – the past. We read in the context of what will happen – the future. But most importantly, we read with today in front of us – the present. Part of the challenge is learning to keep all of these perspectives together at one time.

When we read Jesus saying that the day is coming when the Temple will be thrown down, we learn to hear his words relating to the first century, and we hear his words relating to the future, but we also hear him speaking to us, today, in our context.

We learn to hear “temples” not simply as that massive, impressive building built by Herod the Great, but as all the nomic structures, institutions, and belief systems and symbols that give order to our lives. Everything that is, that is not God – democracy, capitalism, the United States, White supremacy, and “the American way of life” and so on. But it also about who we are personally and what we believe, and how we have always perceived ourselves. Our “temples” are how all of this makes sense and how we fit it all together.

Hear me: Jesus is not telling us that all these things are bad. The truth is some temples might be good, and some temples are not. We have to discern which is which. It is also true that how we see temples change over time. Remember that the People of Israel once followed God in a Tabernacle, and God was the One who was the “I am who I am.” I am a verb; I am the God on the move and the God of change and transformation and liberation, so to put God into the Temple was a big move. At the same time, at its best, the Temple in Jerusalem meant that in a chaotic world, you could always count on a stable God. Some things change but God does not. Read the Psalms. Every time you read of God’s greatness and God being high and lifted up and God on the throne, the image is of God firmly ensconced in the Temple. These are not bad things, but Jesus is reminding us to not get our temples confused with God.

Part of Jesus’s criticism of the Temple was about how the Temple had lost its purpose. It was to be a place of prayer and worship; instead, it had become a den, a safe haven of corruption and power.

The religious authorities did everything to hold on to the Temple because it was about power. The Zealots were fighting to save the Temple and reform it and make it great again. And meanwhile, the Romans were on a campaign to control or destroy the Temple. In the middle of it all, Jesus is saying, “Pay attention. Look and discern through all of this chaos and confusion. Look for the true and living God and see what God is bringing about.

Furthermore, Jesus is not telling us that God will destroy the Temple. He does not say God causes it to be destroyed. He is reminding us this First Sunday of

Advent, that temples come, and temples go, and our calling is to keep our eyes on the prize: the living God.

These days some of us look backward to past glory or past stability or past order and harmony, and because we sense that this past is changing and even passing away, we end up angry or depressed or in shock. Many want to elect messiahs who will take us back to the good old days. And some of us want our temples of White Supremacy to last forever and as they begin to crumble we get our guns and want to recount the votes. Others of us want something different. But what we have in common is our anger or outrage or depression over what's ending.

On the other hand, we can listen to Jesus and not be afraid of the end of our temples, and instead, we can look forward to the new beginning God is bringing in Christ.

Last year, Cliff and Mary Broom joined our congregation. Cliff had been going back and forth to Louisiana to prepare and then sell their house. He went through the process of house inspections and so on. So, he had a practiced eye when he drove up to our church building one day and casually mentioned to me, "You know the church's roof is sagging in the middle." I later went out and looked. It took a careful eye, but sure enough you could see it sagging. Of course, what we ended up doing was having it examined by structural engineers and indeed, we discovered that not only was our roof beginning to collapse but the exterior load bearing walls were bulging outward under the strain.

All of that is why we could not simply put on a new roof but had to completely rebuild the substructure of the roof and rebuild and reinforce part of the exterior walls.

I have been thinking about Cliff's word to me over this past year: "You know the church's roof is sagging." I know, you know, and Cliff and Mary know that he was simply talking about our roof. But discerning apocalyptically and biblically, here was a black man who grew up in the Mississippi Delta telling a middle-class white man, "Your roof is sagging... your roof, your building, your structure of reality is going to collapse."

This is why we keep praying and discerning. The restructuring of our building symbolizes a new beginning God is bringing among us.

Advent is the time of learning to wait, patiently. It is learning to give up our efforts at control or attempting to regain control. It is not about passivity or resignation. Instead, we learn to channel our impatience into what poet Adrienne Rich called, "wild patience." Wild patience discerns when it is time to wait and when it is time to act. Wild patience discerns what kind of action and learns to trust that God is at work through small, everyday actions.

People like me, a White man, tend to think, "Don't just sit there. Do something!" But Advent is God saying, "Let it go, you're not in charge. You're not in control and you do not need to be in control."

Let's pay attention to Mark. For Mark, the true apocalypse where God is intervening is the Cross. When Jesus dies on the Cross, the sun is darkened, the

cosmos is shaken, and the powers in their heavenly places are thrown down. And Mark tells us, “The curtain of the Temple was torn into, from top to bottom” (15:38). Temples and dividing walls are over and done with. Paul says that in the Cross, we are no longer strangers and aliens but together we are members of the household of God.

Let’s put on our tri-focals and patiently look for it. God is at work building a new household.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.