

Lectionary 33/Proper 28 (B)  
November 15, 2009  
Text: Mark 13:1-8

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When I was a teenager, once in a while my family would go to a steak house not too far from where we lived. It had quirky, rustic décor and wonderful food, and it was always fun to go there. On the menu there was one item I was always curious about, but never ordered. It was a 72 oz. steak—4 ½ pounds of meat—plus baked potato, salad, a roll, and who knows what else. On the menu it said: if you could eat the whole thing, it was free. But even with a teenage appetite and a huge metabolism rate, I couldn't imagine eating all of that. On some level I guess I understood that bigger is not always better.

It's an insight Jesus tried to share with the disciples. Looking at the temple, the disciples were awe-struck. "Look! What large stones! What a huge building!" And it was. Herod the Great had built it to be one of the great wonders of the ancient world. It was 150 feet tall, and the outside was gleaming white rock, much of it covered in gold. In some places the stones were 4 feet high and 15 feet long. The temple wasn't just immense. It was majestic, and a monument to the majesty of Israel's God. It's no wonder the disciples had their mouths hanging open.

But Jesus gave no hint of being impressed. It was as if he were seeing something entirely different. And I suppose he was. Instead of massive stonework and a towering edifice, Jesus saw the moral and spiritual crisis of his people. The religious leaders had completely divorced worship of God from the conduct of life, from compassion for those in need, from justice for the poor. And for that reason, the nation was sick. It was bloated and distorted by greed and by the abuse of power. The religious leaders wanted bigger, bigger, more. They were making themselves rich off the temple system. So Jesus warned that the whole system was doomed to come down.

Jesus said it would happen "in this generation." And it did. Less than 40 years later the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem. And when they took the city, thousands upon thousands of people died. The suffering was terrible. The city was burned and the temple was destroyed. All of the gold that had adorned the temple was stripped off and hauled away to Rome. Jesus never indicated that his followers should think of these events as punishment from God. Instead, they were the consequences of human greed and thoughtlessness. This is what happens to a society when people care only about themselves and neglect the needs of others and the greater good. It will collapse. The whole thing will come down.

But Jesus' words weren't all dark. He told the disciples that through this time of suffering, God would still be present with God's people, giving them wisdom and comfort with the Holy Spirit. And... even the destruction of the temple

isn't the end of the world. It's only the beginning of birth pangs for something new God is bringing to life.

It seems to me that many of us have seen something like this. In some of our lifetimes, we've seen the collapse of Jim Crow, the whole system of white privilege in our country that restricted the freedom of people of color. That old system was all about enriching some while neglecting the needs of others, and it had to collapse. The whole thing had to come down. And it did. It's been a long, terrible struggle. But is it possible that we're seeing the first hints of something new being born? A post-racial society?

Many of us were alive to see the end of the Berlin Wall, 20 years ago this week. It was built to keep people down, so it had to come down. And it finally did. And even though the struggle for freedom is still going on, in some places a new and free order of things is definitely being born. God is present in that new world being born.

The past year has been a difficult and challenging time in our country and around the world. Companies that were "too big to fail" were shaken, and our financial system was brought down hard. I don't think the whole thing is really ready to collapse, but I worry about those who want to pick up where we were, where reckless risk is just another way to make money, and a few people at the top make hundreds of millions while jobs and benefits are cut for many. I long for that sort of "pirate capitalism" to collapse, so that something like a "conscientious capitalism" can be born. I long for God to take us in a new direction.

Perhaps the words Jesus spoke to his disciples about the turmoil and tragedy around the destruction of the temple can speak to us as well. This is not the end. This is just the beginning of the birth pangs. God is still at work in this world to give birth to something new. God is at work to bring life and hope. That doesn't mean that things might not get bad. That doesn't mean that it's all going to be bigger and better from here on out. It means, instead, that God will be present to support us with the Holy Spirit, to give us comfort and direction. It means that we have a part to play in God's work to bring life and hope, and we can count on God's Spirit to show us the way. Because God does have a dream for this world—a dream of all creation healed and made whole, of all relationships made just and blessed with peace.

And every one of us has a part to play in the unfolding of that dream. Our part may not be enormous. Maybe it's just "human-sized." Maybe we won't single-handedly bring about world peace, but following Jesus, we will be a force for forgiveness and reconciliation in our relationships. Maybe we won't end hunger and disease, but obeying Jesus, we strive to live with compassion. Maybe we won't personally reverse global warming, but attentive to God's Spirit, we seek to live and act with awareness. We don't live in a way to make

ourselves “big” and “great.” Instead, like Jesus, we live with humility. We give of ourselves to serve our neighbor.

We also have a part to play together, and today we have something to celebrate. This morning we’ll be awarding endowment grants. They really aren’t very big—just a few hundred dollars here and there. But those few hundred dollars will help Northwest Portland Ministries provide for seniors in our neighborhood and help run the Food Box program out of our basement. They’ll help Bethel Lutheran provide a safe place for kids after school. They’ll help children in this neighborhood learn about God’s love through Vacation Bible School. They’ll help women from First Immanuel put together health kits to ship overseas to people in need. None of these are very big, but they are “human sized.” They’re all about the care and compassion one person can show to another. And God is at work in that.

There’s one thing we can always count on. God will never give up on us, or on this world God loves so much. Even, maybe especially, when life is challenging, we can count on God’s Spirit to give strength and comfort, to give wisdom and show us the way, so that we can play a part that is the right size for us in the new world God is giving birth to. Thanks be to God. Amen