

23rd Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 28B
Daniel 12:1-3
Psalm 16
Heb 10, selections
Mark 13:1-8

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God's natural world has put on a beautiful show for us this fall, trees blazing with color against blue skies. But this week the colors of fall are coming to an end, and the chill in the air is telling us we've turned the corner toward winter.

Just as the seasons of the natural world change, so the seasons of our church year change. December will bring Advent and a new church year. But before that new beginning, in these last days of November we turn our sights toward themes that have to do with endings and limits.

Today's scriptures might not be anyone's choice for inspirational reading, but as I've spent time with them, they've led me into rich reflection on what is temporary in life and what is permanent. The message I find is that many things will change and pass away, but our God will remain forever. In the midst of changing times and uncertain futures, we are called to stand firm and trust in God's ultimate goodness and promise.

Our reading from Mark pictures the disciples walking through Jerusalem with Jesus. They were country people, and visiting the capitol city at the height of festival season must have been thrilling. The narrow streets with crowds of people jostling; the raucous noise of greetings and vendors; the pungent smells of food cooking and fires smoking and animals doing what animals do. Imagine how astounded they were to view the magnificent Temple on the hill. Its buildings and courtyards measured a mile around! Some stones were 40 feet long and 6 feet high! The Jerusalem Temple was one of the ancient wonders of the world, the very symbol of the nation of Israel, and they couldn't help but exclaim: "Teacher, look! How amazing!"

But what did Jesus reply? "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down!" His words had to be a shock. And they also turned out to be true. Today, all that's left of that great Temple is a corner of retaining wall, called the Wailing Wall or Western Wall – a shadow of what used to be.

In one sense, then, Jesus was predicting the future. That seemingly permanent monument *did* come down, destroyed by the Romans just 40 years after Jesus' resurrection. But in the larger sense, Jesus wasn't just talking about the fate of that particular building, or even that nation.

Jesus was pushing the disciples – and all of us-- to look ahead toward a time when *every* human institution will give way before the power of God. The day when God will bring God's final kingdom, and time as we know it will end. We don't know when that day will be or exactly what it will look like. But we do believe that one day the old will pass away and the new will come, and earth will experience God's complete victory over sin and death and evil.

Jesus challenged the disciples -- and us -- to join him in taking the long view -- to look beyond what appears impressive today (temples included), and cling instead to what is truly *lasting*. To place our confidence, not in the work of human hands, but in the work of *God's* hands.

Nobody likes to hear that the things they trust and depend on will one day pass away. Yet there are times in our lives when temples do fall and structures do crumble-- when things we have counted on, do give way. These can actually be *rich* times for the life of faith, for they force us to confront ultimate things.

We've all been through the changes. We have lost someone we loved and felt our world turn upside down. We have faced health challenges which alter the way we move in the world, and how we interact with others. As a global community, we have weathered economic and political changes that are still reshaping us on many levels. As a nation, it would be hard to name something that has not been shaken up in recent years. Citizens at both ends of the political spectrum experience the gnawing sense that important things they've depended on in the past are now crumbling -- traditions, institutions, a former and familiar way of life. We are going through enormous cultural changes, and that's in addition to the changes brought by new technology that has altered everything from commerce to communication.

Things change. In fact, it has been said that *change is the only constant*. Yet for people of faith, that's not the whole story. *Change* is not the only constant -- *God* is the only constant. In the midst of all the changes, God is *constant* in faithfulness, *constant* in bringing new life. God *never wavers* in love and commitment to the human family. God's unconditional love has claimed us and will never let us go, no matter what we go through.

More than this, we can trust that through the change and turmoil, God is always working to bring about something greater than we can imagine. A new age of justice and mercy and wholeness. Some things will have to die along the way, so that God's new creation can come to life. Greed will have to die. Abuse will have to die. Violence will have to die. Whatever diminishes life or imprisons people will have to die. It won't be an easy process. It will be as hard as labor pains! But like labor pains, this struggle has a purpose, this pain leads to life.

Jesus said exactly that: "This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." What looked to people around him like an ending, Jesus knew was actually a beginning. The temple's days *were* finished. The old way of worshipping God *was* coming to an end, and in its place was emerging a new way, a world-changing, history-changing way, as God made ready to save the entire human race through Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection.

Birth pangs! That phrase is good news that rings down through the ages to us. Reminding us to watch, when changes come, or when we feel shaken and unsettled, to watch and see if we can discern just what it is that God may actually be bringing to birth.

In human history and in our own personal histories, there will inevitably be confusion and struggle -- birth pangs, labor pains -- but new birth is what God is truly about. That shouldn't

surprise us, because we've seen it all along. Remember how God brought a tiny baby to birth from a humble, unmarried mother, and that baby became our Savior. Remember how God brought a crucified man back to life and made the empty grave a sign of victory forever.

And God keeps on birthing something new in us. God keeps on shaping us into forward-leaning people. People of patience and perseverance and hope and trust. People who "Fear Not" -- because we trust in God, who holds the future and lovingly leads us into it.

Today in worship we are doing some remarkably forward-reaching, "Fear Not" things as a congregation.

We're dedicating our pledge cards for next year. Prayerfully estimating how much we each will give to support Christ's ministry through First Immanuel. Challenging ourselves to be as generous as we're able. Now, why would we invest that way? Because we are forward-reaching people who trust that God's purposes for this creation are good, and we want to be part of that unfolding goodness just as fully as we can.

Today in worship we are baptizing baby Ettie -- that's a "Fear Not" action if ever there was one! We are trusting in God's love to permeate Ettie's life and guide her throughout her years. We are trusting God to bless Maddie and Chris as they bring up this precious little girl in this congregation, trusting God to empower all of us to support this young family, and Ettie, as she grows and matures.

Just think of the changes Ettie will see in her lifetime! She will experience human life long after many of us are gone. And it's our prayer -- and trust -- that God's baptism blessing will keep Ettie her in faith through all the changes. And give Ettie and her generation the creativity and love and hope to keep on caring for this earth and the human family in God's name.

May Ettie experience her relationship with God as a strong constant. And may all of us "Fear Not" when changes come, but instead trust in God who is creatively, lovingly, wisely, birthing new things in this world God loves.

Thanks be to God! Amen.