

## Little Apocalypses

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Crozet United Methodist Church

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Mark 13:1-8

*As he 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 birthpangs."*

When Tracy and I had been married for almost a year, the time came for us to fully consummate the marriage by shopping for a car together. I don't know why we did; things had been going so well. This is how you truly discover the kind of person you married, and our experience was no different. The first thing we learned was that we had no idea what we were doing, and the second was that I am afraid of large purchases and, for some reason, believe that no car should ever cost more than \$10,500, a number that magically appeared in my head one day for one apparent reason.

Despite what I just told you, I still believed myself to be something of an authority on things, so I reasoned that it was my responsibility to discern what was wrong with every car, every car salesman, every dealership, and every manufacturer. You probably won't believe this, but having me along did not speed up the process one bit.

One evening, after I had, for reasons I no longer remember, insisted that we leave what I soon learned was one too many dealerships, as we drove away, Tracy shouted at me, "Is EVERYTHING an ethical issue for you?"

Occasionally, I like to believe that the real reason that the disciples always seemed to be getting it wrong in the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John was that they, to put it simply, were not me. I like to read myself into the story, as the thirteenth disciple, the smart one who Jesus really likes, who *never* argued about who among the disciples was the greatest or complained about Jesus being anointed at Bethany, and who, at the table on the night Jesus was arrested, when Jesus predicted his betrayal by a disciple, and everyone was saying "Is it I?" would have replied, "Maybe, because it is obviously not *me*."

Of course, I know better. I have the benefit of knowing how the story ends, which of course, the disciples, people living the story in real time, only received later. I say all of this

because were I one of Jesus' disciples in this morning's text, enjoying the profound majesty of the Temple in Jerusalem, only to hear Jesus predict its destruction, I most likely would have shouted "Is EVERYTHING an ethical issue for you?"

Of course, Jesus does say this to his poor disciples, with whom it is difficult not to sympathize. By the time of Jesus, the Temple had been torn down twice since Solomon built it, yet it was being rebuilt under the supervision of King Herod, who despite being a brutal and possibly insane puppet despot, knew what he was doing when it came to building projects. This second rebuilding of the Temple had begun prior to the birth of Christ and was finished after his crucifixion.<sup>1</sup>

I have struggled and failed to find a modern experience equivalent to seeing the Temple for the first time. In a time before photographs, there was nothing to prepare the disciples for it, and it was truly one of the wonders of the ancient world. The perimeter circumference was two-thirds of a mile. Its marble walls stood 150 feet high, built of blocks weighing many tons. The outside of the Temple was decorated with 40-foot-high columns of white marble. The Temple contained ten gates by which to enter the temple's outer courts, each covered in silver or gold plate. Two of the doors stood 45 feet in height, and one gate in particular, known as the Beautiful Gate, was cast of Corinthian bronze. The eastern front of the temple and part of the side walls were plated with gold. The gleaming white marble and stunning metal work made the temple flash in the Middle Eastern sun and dominate the skyline of Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

Who could blame the disciples for being both impressed and excited? Consider all that was going on in their lives at that moment: Jesus has just entered Jerusalem earlier in the week to the roar of cheering crowds who hailed him as their king. In that very same Temple, they had seen Jesus by way of skilled rhetoric silence the chief priests, scribes, and elders. He had amazed the Pharisees and the Herodians with his teaching on "giving to Caesar what is Caesar's and giving to God what is God's." Another brilliant teaching before the Sadducees had so amazed them that Mark tells us that "no one dared to ask him any more questions." Finally, there was the text we read last Sunday, where Jesus notices the extravagant gift of the widow and lifts her up as a model of generosity and faith.

And that's the problem for the disciples. Everything seems to be going so well. They have clearly bet on the right candidate, and just when it appears that he is about to begin his reign, which must have been good news for his disciples, he has to go and spoil it with this talk of the complete and utter destruction of this brand new, incredibly beautiful Temple. The destruction of the Temple would have been unthinkable to Jesus' Jewish contemporaries, and certainly to the Jewish leaders of his day. It appeared to be an indestructible building, and it's

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<sup>1</sup> Schmit, Clayton J. "The End is Still to Come," in *Pulpit Resource*, November 19, 2006, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 5.

very existence was a sign of the presence of God, their God, in their midst, and it was the very center of Jewish religious life.

Yet, Jesus does say this. In the next chapter of Mark's gospel, it becomes the basis of the case made against him. Later in this story, Jesus and the disciples are on the Mount of Olives, which would have afforded them a spectacular view of the Temple, and Jesus' predictions become even more dire: He foresees false messiahs, wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, and famines, and by the way, "Don't be alarmed."

This reading is called Mark's "Little Apocalypse," but it sounds pretty big to me.

What a difference a few days make! From the joy and glory of accompanying Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to this talk of the end of the world. Do you think they wondered if Jesus had given up on his own message? This does not sound like the confident messiah-king about to reclaim the throne of Israel for God. And here Jesus is talking about false teachings, wars, famines, and a falling Temple. Peace and prosperity were always signs of God's presence, power, and love, and here Jesus is shaking the foundations of their faith.

And things had been going so well.

Why is it that, just when it seems like things are going so well, that God intervenes? Christians believe in a generous, benevolent, omnipresent, omnipotent God, who created us "a little lower than the angels," and who desires to be discovered and known by us, yet we have these times when our lives are upended, when our situations are unsettled, when everything stops making sense, and when the foundations of our faith are shaken. If God *wants* us to believe, why do you and I have these little apocalypses in our lives?

Perhaps the answer is that we need our foundations shaken every once in a while.

The Temple may represent God's power and presence, but the Temple is not God. Political security and economic prosperity may represent God's presence, but they too are not God. The church has a mandate to be Christ's body on earth, but even the church is not Christ. Perhaps in this text, Jesus is warning us against mistaking the symbols of our faith for faith itself. So, if the Jerusalem Temple was for God's people, evidence of God's favor, presence, and might, and yet Jesus could envision a day when even its foundation would be destroyed, what foundations in our own lives, and in our church, need to be shaken, and if we believe that our shakiness is a sign of God's presence, could we not learn to ask for more?

Could it be that our problem is that so often when we feel our lives being shaken, we assume that either God is mad at us, or that God has otherwise dropped the ball. Like the Jewish contemporaries of Jesus, we (especially me) equate the shaking of our faith with the absence of God, and not a sign of what God is doing right here in our midst. The word "apocalypse" is one that we associate with doomsday imagery; profound storms causing the Statue of Liberty to be impaled upon the Washington Monument. That kind of stuff.

However, the word *apocalypse* actually means "to reveal," or "to uncover." Could it be that in our lives, or in difficult days like the ones our nation is facing today, that these are days

when God is most available, most visible, most in our midst, if only we can separate from our own pain, and our own expectations and understanding of God long enough to see what God is doing before our eyes?

I realize that this is a hard teaching. Apocalyptic stuff always is. I have had many opportunities to make my Christian vocation locating myself with suffering people, and their are times, in the preoperative room, in the postoperative room, in my study, in the funeral home, when the marriage has come completely apart, when the child has gotten in trouble, when the job has come to an end, when the bills are too big and numerous to pay, all those little apocalypses, sometimes all I know to do is to quote this morning's scripture. The Bible addresses pointless pain. It talks about redemptive pain, and it talks about the kind of pain Jesus addresses at the close of this morning's reading: birthpangs, the pain that most often comes before great joy.

Sometimes, the best we can do to understand where God is in the midst of our little apocalypses is to pray that the pain we face are birthpangs, the pain that comes before profound blessings. Sometimes all we can do is to pray that God is using the pain we feel to prepare for us something so wonderful it could only have been borne of suffering.

Our Lord prepares his disciples, and in doing so prepares us for false teachings, for wars, famines, and the shaking of our faith, but then he tells us, not as a threat, but as a *blessing*: *Behold! I am making all things new!*

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.