

Sermon
Nov. 14, 2021
Pollocksville PC
“Yearning for God’s Grace”

Prayer for Illumination:

God of grace, God of glory we come before you this day to hear your word read and proclaimed. By the power of your Holy Spirit reach the deepest crevices of our souls. Inspire in us a deep faith as we walk through this time of wilderness wandering. We believe Oh God. Help our unbelief. Through Christ, In Christ. Amen.

Scripture: Mark 13: 1 – 8

It’s thought that Mark wrote his gospel on the run. Sometime between 65 – 75 CE, or after Jesus’ death. There was great persecution going on during this time. Nero was after the Christians in Rome and the disastrous Jewish/Roman war followed. In 70 CE the 2nd Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by Rome.

Mark clearly asserts the Good News of Jesus Christ in this very difficult time in Christian history. Within the great suffering, war, violence, greed and incredible injustice, Mark proclaims that through Jesus’ ministry and death God’s promise to end this evil world and create a new existence for the elect is imminent. Mark is an apocalyptic writing, meaning Mark uses metaphorical, other worldly language to describe the end of an age, or the end of the world as we know it. Much suffering will take place before the new heaven and earth will come to fruition.

Our passage this morning comes towards the end of Jesus’ life here on earth. He has already entered Jerusalem for the last time. In just 2 short chapters Jesus will be crucified and die. Just before our passage Jesus is teaching in the synagogue in Jerusalem. He’s noticing how the people toss money in the offering box. That’s when he notices a poor widow who places 2 small coins, a measly 2 cents, in the box. Jesus proclaims that the widow gave more to the synagogue than all the others together. She gave extravagantly what she couldn’t afford. Her offering represents giving all she had. Listen now as Jesus and the disciples walk away from the Temple.

SERMON:

I bet, if I took a poll of all the adults here today, you would say you have treated a child the way Jesus treated his disciples this particular day. As they walked out of the Temple in Jerusalem the disciples were really excited about seeing the large stones used to build the temple. How many of you have had a child run up to you excited about something, not able to contain their excitement for one more minute, only to have you say, not now honey. I have something else on my mind.

The disciples were amazed at the large stones placed together to build the Jerusalem Temple. They weren’t from a big city? They were fishermen, from the countryside and small towns. We can understand their amazement, if we think about the first time we saw a big city sky scraper, or a beautiful ancient cathedral or anything that simply took our breath, because of it’s enormous size and beauty.

I still remember, as if it was yesterday, how I felt the first time I saw the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. I was fortunate, after 7 years of seminary to finish up with a 3 week travel seminar to the Middle East. We had been in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan for the first week. We had just spent 2 days and one night around the Dead Sea. We stayed near Jericho and visited the infamous Israeli fort. Masada in Hebrew. It's the site located on top of huge rock plateau. It's where the end of the first Jewish/Roman war took place. The siege of Masada, by Roman soldiers, is historically famous. Israel still swears in new military soldiers at Masada today. We were able to watch such a swearing in service the day we visited.

The trip to the Middle East, specifically Israel, was the icing on the cake of my long seminary education. A trip of a lifetime. I literally walk around with a picture Bible in my head. Seeing the Temple Mount for the first time in person was amazing. It was life changing.

The trip from the Dead Sea to Jerusalem was a long, difficult trip UP a steep, rocky mountain. The bus churned and churned up the mountain of rock and sand, where nothing green could ever grow. The suspension grew as we made the trip to Jerusalem. This was the part of the trip we were all waiting for. We couldn't wait to see the great city, the holy city of Jerusalem in person.

The bus driver swung the bus around as we approached the city. We made our way up the road that led to the Mount of Olives. We were going to get the very same view described in our passage this morning. Our first view of this great city was going to be what Jesus and his disciples saw that evening so long ago.

The guide built our excitement, by having us look first in the other direction. He told us to get our cameras ready. Just as we made our way around the last turn, he directed us to look to the right. Over the loud roar of the bus engine, I could hear everyone gasp, just as I did. It literally took our breath.

I understand the disciple's excitement. I can also understand how Jesus took the wind out of their sails. He ignored their excitement, saying, "Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left on another. Every one of them will be thrown down!" I had waited my whole life, to see the Temple in Jerusalem. My excitement though was deflated, as the guide began to explain the beautiful building we were looking at, with the famous gold dome on top, was not the Ancient Jewish Temple from the Bible. It was instead an Islamic Mosque.

Now I knew, the Temple had been destroyed in 70 AD. Jesus was alluding to this historic event in our passage this morning. I knew that the Temple was never rebuilt. What I didn't know though, was the long, excruciatingly painful history, which led to it being replaced by a Muslim Mosque. My excitement dwindled like the disciples, but my interest in this building and its history did not. Jesus knew what was going to happen. He was trying to warn and teach his disciples.

He and his disciples sat, no doubt around a campfire, on the hillside where the Mt of Olives is located. It's right across from the Temple Mount. Peter, James, John and Andrew finally got up the nerve, to ask Jesus what he meant by, "not one stone would be left. The Temple would be destroyed?" They said, "Tell us, when will these things happen? What will be the sign that this is all about to be accomplished?"

Jesus' answer was far from simple. We only get a glimpse today of the grand apocalyptic images he used to describe the Temple's destruction. I don't want to deflate your imagination. You perhaps can easily get caught up in his bizarre description of the end of an age, or the end of the world. He describes it as, Wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines.

Apocalyptic literature, like we find this morning, wasn't written thinking people would take it literally. It was never written to be some kind of predictive message about the future. Or a way to predict the end of the world. Instead, it's a form of literature, written with great imagination, that addresses issues pressing down on a community.

In this passage, Jesus wasn't spelling out some predictive code, but instead was describing a reality in metaphor. He and his disciples were likely experiencing persecution. We know Mark was writing this Gospel during some pretty horrible times. Wars, earthquakes and famines were all common, prophetic, images of destruction. Jesus was describing what his death and resurrection would mean to the existence of the Jewish Temple. He was describing what it was going to take for his kingdom to be born here and now.

Eugene Peterson, in his Biblical translation *The Message*, with a study Bible with it, says this about our passage this morning and I paraphrase a bit. "We shouldn't be alarmed at wars and rumors of wars. They have plagued our history for millennia. Our history is not a closed system. History isn't some treadmill that goes round and round. History... has a goal.....Society, with all its institutions, religious organizations, politics, humanity and governments, will be redeemed and re-created by God."

What we're involved in here on earth has eternal worth and meaning which will last forever. Earth isn't eternal. Nothing man made is eternal. We shouldn't spend time despairing over the temporary things we see and experience around us. There's not much hope if we base our hope on human efforts. Peterson says, "if we believe in God's promises, we trust that there will be a time, as Isaiah prophesied, when men will turn their swords into shovels, their spears into hoes. A time when, no nation will fight another nation."

Peace on earth won't come through war. Neither will it come through diplomacy. There will be no lasting peace without the Prince of Peace residing in the hearts of all humanity. That's the truth we find in Scripture.

Whether we're staring at, gazing in disbelief at, the mess we find in our country and world or we're glaring and despairing over the human heart and all the horrible things we're capable of, the eternal truth that we can and should grab hold of is Jesus Christ. He came, was sent by God, to save us from all this mess. And save us he did.

You know we think we have Jesus figured out. We think we know "what Jesus would do," what he would think about what's going on in our world. We've heard a lot about this on both sides of the political divide these days. Both sides spout what view is more Christian than the other. Both sides assert their dignity and righteousness. Jesus dismisses all this in our passage today. He doesn't dismiss politics. He was a fervent, zealous, political figure in his day. What he dismisses though is putting our trust and hope in man-made things.

If you didn't catch it, let me read it again. "Beware, Watch out", he says, "that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming I am he and will deceive many. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen. But the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and there will be famines. This is just the beginning of birth pains." Jesus is inviting us to substitute any destructive power plays, clashes, arguments, violence, injustice, human sin, that we know of today for wars, earthquakes and famines.

"Beware, pay attention," he says, there will be people out there that will deceive many." As it turns out we don't know the things of God. Perhaps, I should say, we're always learning about the things of God. God's vision for this world is more vast than ours. It's always more grand and even more startling than we could know or imagine. Just when we think we have it figured out, we get disappointed. We know little about God, particularly when it comes to predicting the future.

What we have come to rely on, human made things, is no longer trustworthy, Jesus says. Our hope though, is realized when we see all of the destruction, all of the difficult times we're going through, as just birth pains. The Wars, earthquakes and famine of our day are just the hard labor of delivering something spectacular, magnificent, new, the kingdom of God, is just beginning.

The other side of this wilderness wandering, pandemic, violence, injustice, race relations and political division we're in, all the false leaders, all the disappointment that things aren't going our way, or the way we thought they would, all this wilderness wanderings, is just a new beginning. The birthing pains of a new beginning.

Jesus says, "Watch OUT!" He's not saying, be watchful, like the starry-eyed disciples. They want to know every little sign that point to the end coming near. Jesus warns his disciples to not get sucked in by all the mess we see around us. Don't get discouraged by all the mess we're experiencing. Instead, focus on what matters, eternal things of God. God is bringing about something new, something great. Something wonderful is on the horizon. God's grace, his love and promise to make things new is near at hand.

In God's realm, for which we're part of individually, and corporately as the church, in God's realm, suffering has a purpose. Suffering signals the end of an age, the end of the world, or society as we know it and the beginning of new life. Suffering shouldn't lead Christians to hopelessness, but instead suffering can lead to hope.

Suffering creates a longing for God, a longing for better times, a yearning for justice to be restored, a yearning, in other words, for God's gracious mercy, God's never ending love, God's shalom, wellbeing for all...God's grace. Suffering encourages us to long for God to come and rescue us. To save us. Suffering encourages a yearning for God's grace. When we're yearning for God, he has us, right where he wants us. God yearns for us to depend on him for eternity.

Salvation is a process. It enters our lives to offer both a challenge and hope. Some people want a religion, that offers salvation without suffering. But in reality, salvation only comes with suffering. Salvation comes about through the difficulty of repentance, forgiveness and new birth.

Salvation isn't some specific moment in time, but our whole life speaks to a process of being saved over and over. We change or spin or redefine suffering and God's hand in it, because we have a hard time dealing with what causes suffering. It's not God. The cause of suffering is a broken, sinful, sin filled world, which is in so many ways, crying, screaming even, for God's grace. His mercy. If it only knew.

As Jesus and his disciples moved from the grand steps of the Temple to the beautiful retreat to the Mount of Olives, directly across from it, we find a sign, a signaling, a metaphor for, the end of the current age. In the midst of the destruction, violence, suffering and sin, lies the seeds of salvation.

Salvation has come in the person of Jesus, but is not yet complete, because his suffering, his excruciating pain, humiliating rejection and crucifixion have not taken place yet in the storyline. We know what happens, but the story hasn't been told by Mark as we ready our passage this morning. Jesus will rise. New life will come. And we can trust that Jesus will come again, and again, to bring his kingdom to completion.

In the midst of chaos, actually sometimes it seems way more than just chaos. In the midst of wilderness wanderings, we're standing in what seems to be a world in self-destruct mode, the world coming to an end, a world at the end of an age, where we find suffering from storms, political divisions, divisions in the church, suffering in our own personal lives, injustice running rampant. In all this and more we find ourselves yearning more than ever for God's grace through his salvation. At times, it may seem, the freedom of salvation is a flickering dream. In all this we may find ourselves crying out, Come, Lord Jesus, come. Please come quickly.

Advent is just 2 weeks away and Christmas will be here before we know it. We will celebrate anew Christ being born. Christ coming once again. The opportunity for Jesus to enter our lives, for the first time, or more fully for those of us already living in the faith. The opportunity for Jesus to enter our lives is always before us. The opportunity to acknowledge our need to ask the Holy Spirit to open our lives to new life again and again. God wants and longs for us, our entire selves, our hearts, souls, minds and strength to yearn for, to pine for, his salvation. His amazing grace.

We cannot escape the awful destruction of the apocalypses, metaphorically the end of the world, we experience today. But for those of us who live with a faith that seeks a deep relationship with God, we find, in and through God's grace, a pathway to salvation. Through the devastation and suffering within us, and all around us, God's grace is there drawing us ever near. The time of destruction is the end, but we know through the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, the end is also the beginning, for a people of deep faith.

Jesus and his disciples were gazing at the Jewish Temple across the narrow valley, the Valley of Jehoshaphat. No doubt they cared deeply about what it symbolized and meant for them and the Jewish people. To lose it would bring about a profound sense of loss and grief. For them, it literally meant a separation from

God's presence. Jesus' words to his disciples and to us today are, "Beware, Watch out! Pay attention, resist, hold out for, the coming of the Son of Man. This time we're in, this time of wilderness wandering and separation from God is but the beginning of the birth pangs!" New life is just below the surface and is surely coming. Amen.
