

Apocalyptic Hope
First Reading: Jeremiah 7:1-4
Second Reading: Mark 13:1-8

I have never traveled to Italy. I don't know if or when I will make that trip in the future, though I'm sure it would be a lovely destination. It holds no all caps prominence on our bucket list, but rankings change, so you never know... Thus, I have been content with the reviews of your trips to that cradle of the Roman Empire, that treasure trove of sights, tastes, art, architecture, fashion, vibrant people ... and super-fast Ferraris (zoom, zoom). From what you tell me, and what I hear from every returning traveler after their Roman holiday, is that there are a whole lot of churches over there, (*930 in Rome alone*), and many times, that observation is made with an odd mix of amazement and exhaustion. How many churches can one tourist's brain assimilate?

It is kind of funny watching you eagerly scroll, scroll, and scroll some more through your photos in search of that one sculpture in that one chapel of that one church you believe I just have to see ... *Oh, which one was it?* Suddenly, I'm caught in the middle of a marital spat over which church is which. *That's not Venice, Ethel, that's Atlanta!*

Don't get me wrong, I love walking through churches, but I love seeing a bit more variety of styles and periods from the Baroque majesty of St. Paul's in London to Eero Saarinen's North Christian Church in Columbus, Indiana to Ruple Memorial Presbyterian in Blowing Rock to Providence Presbyterian just a few miles east of here to the St. Louis Cathedral in ... St. Louis. In fact, when we were working on the design for this sanctuary, I was afraid I'd become known as the sanctuary stalker. Can I peek into your worship space?

However, I can relate to cathedral overload. The art, the carvings, the mosaics, friezes, altars, chancels, naves, organs, and stained glass are spectacular, but a brain can only process so much and appreciation diminishes with repetition, and tired feet, and growling stomachs. *That's a Caravaggio!* Great, but what I could really go for is a slice of pepperoni.

They are selling churches these days in these parts, yes, even here in the Bible Belt. Congregations shrink, budgets tighten, maintenance increases, and eventually someone is turning off the lights and planting a real estate sign outside the narthex. A developer divides it into condos, a Bohemian artist converts one into a studio, an aspiring restaurateur makes

plans for, well, *Supperland*. Churches wax and wane, structures are built with prayer and eventually waste away from rust, decay, scandal, weather, grudges, storms, the growing ratio of deaths over baptisms, and sometimes, the wrecking ball arrives in the name of progress. There has been a lot, and I mean a lot of hand-wringing throughout my time in ministry over the decline of mainline churches, as some urban Protestant cathedrals are only kept alive by the endowment gift of a Carnegie, Mellon, or Rockefeller from long ago. Statistics are floated predicting the disappearance of the church by the middle part of this century. Maybe Joni Mitchell's final song will be *They Ditched the Steeple and Put Up a Tesla lot*. Yet, I believe such anxieties miss the whole point of this thing called church.

I read that one of the first megachurch celebrity preachers, the late Robert Schuller, was asked the one essential thing a church needed to have in order to grow. His answer, "a large and accessible parking lot."

I don't believe that ... at all. Jesus never expressed that in the Gospels, and I know Paul didn't include that wisdom in his letters to the churches. And guess what, Schuller's Crystal Cathedral, along with its parking lot, ended up being sold years ago.

When Jesus caught an inkling of Schuller's mindset in one of his disciples, he shut him down, but quick. *“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.’”*

A number of you have traveled to the Holy Land and stepped up to the wailing wall where prayers are inserted in the cracks between the stones, and you have reported to me how incredibly large those ancient stones are. You've said you can't imagine how the ancient Israelites were able to erect those massive building blocks without any power equipment. I get it. I mean, it seems pretty hard to construct a traffic circle even with all kinds of power equipment, right?

The Wailing Wall, more often called the Western Wall, is what remains of the retaining wall supporting the Temple Mount in the old city of Jerusalem. Atop it sat the first and second temples so significant in the history of Israel. The first Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BCE. When the Israelites returned from exile, the Second Temple was constructed in the latter part of that 6th Century, and was later expanded

under King Herod in the years just prior to Jesus' birth. It was an impressive, even intimidating edifice, meant to signify the sovereignty, solidity, and strength of God and additionally, the venality of Herod.

The Jerusalem Temple inspired awe in the pilgrims who made their way to the Holy City three times a year for the Law-appointed Festivals. Perhaps you can recall the gaping awe you experienced the first time you saw some structure that was unlike anything you had seen before — the skyline of Manhattan, the Nave of St. Peter's Basilica, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Such places communicate strength ... permanence.

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Context is important here — for the disciple Jesus instructs here; for the first audience of Mark's Gospel some forty years later; and for us, witnessing across the land the growing cracks in the foundations of the societal structures upon which we have relied for 2 ½ Centuries.

Jesus has entered Jerusalem, which means that this is just days before his arrest and crucifixion. The disciples know that the tension is thick around Jesus, but they do not comprehend that this tension will rise to the level of trial and execution. There remains a sense of awe and excitement as they participate in the festival of Passover, and with maybe a bit of pride in the privilege of being a part of something as grand as the Temple system.

Alumni often feel this as they give a tour of their college campus to their children. However, Jesus knows that the world, the security, and the foundations, moorings, and pillars of life for these disciples are about to be turned upside down. And Jesus wants his disciples to hear, so that that they will later understand, that the presence of God is transitioning from a temple built with human hands to a Son, born of Mary, raised in Nazareth, baptized by John, who called them by the Sea of Galilee, and walked with them to Jerusalem.

Their world will seem like it is coming to an end, but this Son will rise again, establishing a kingdom defined neither by the Temple system or by national hopes; a kingdom based not on a building, or an institution, or a governing power. This kingdom will be based on a person often called

Emmanuel, God with us; and his kingdom will be based on a witness of selfless love that death cannot vanquish; a kingdom where the most vulnerable are cared for and not neglected; a kingdom where love is not meted out selectively, but poured out for all; a kingdom where reconciliation is prioritized, divisions are healed, foes are forgiven, and lives are redeemed.

“Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” We don’t serve a structure. We follow a Redeemer. Challenging the protectors of the status quo, who would deem it worth killing him in order to silence him, that early Christ follower, Stephen, would boldly speak what remains true — *“The Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands.”* In other words, we cannot put God in a box or force God into the shape we think God should be. God will be God. God will not be contained. And God reveals Godself most clearly, not in a building, a movement, a political party, or a narcissistic potentate, or a national flag, but in a person, fully human, fully divine, crucified and risen. As Jesus says in John’s Gospel — *“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up”* — and also — *“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”*

This same message would be equally important to that first audience of Mark's Gospel. The year is 70CE. Rome is at war with Israel, and it was never going to be a fair fight, as the might of empire would destroy Jerusalem's Temple, and this time it would not be rebuilt.

The followers of Christ may have been exiled from the Temple, but the Temple still loomed large in their minds and hearts. So, yet again, they needed to hear the word that — though temples may fall, institutions may fail, and the will to power of the few would seem to eclipse any commitment to seek the welfare of all — a new kingdom was emerging outside the parameters of politics and the powers and principalities that deign to rule our minds and hearts. A new kingdom was being born where self-fulfillment and selflessness would be synonymous.

Once again, this message bears repeating in these hours that are no less discombobulating and precarious than those before November 5th. I can't speak for you but these days the world seems to me like a tumble dryer and somebody's thrown in a bunch of bricks and pressed **Go**. Fractious and conflicted, it is as if *we the people*, are two dudes sitting on a couch watching one screen but seeing two entirely different games. One group was

shouting apocalyptic visions before Nov. 5th, and now a whole other group is shouting apocalyptic visions. Of course, Americans are not as unique as we'd like to think. It should be no surprise that this chapter in Mark's Gospel has over time come to be known as the Little Apocalypse. Then, as now, like a tension in the back of your head destined to become a headache, there is anxiety in the background of our daily doings that we are destined to tear this whole human enterprise down. Churches are disappearing; politicians want you to believe their opposition is a nuclear weapon, button pressed, and about to detonate; massive weather events foreshadow a heated globe well past the point of no return; autocrats thrive and all that is reasonable is cast aside; everybody is quoting Yeats — *Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.*

Jesus knows this is exactly what his disciples will be believing by that Friday afternoon. So, Jesus offers these words as a way to refocus minds and hearts on what is essential and will not fail. You see, a little later, sitting atop the Mount of Olives, which is opposite the Temple mount and higher in elevation so that you could take in a full view of the Temple, the disciples are chewing on Jesus' earlier remark that the great Temple would fall. Really? How could that be? So, they asked Jesus, "*When will this be?*"

Interestingly, Jesus doesn't answer the question, but instead gives them timeless instructions for the interim. *“Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ ... When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come ... nation will rise against nation ... there will be earthquakes in various places ... This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.”*

So, how do we de-discombobulate in uncertain times as the soundtrack of apocalyptic language plays in the background unsettling our best laid plans? Well, we gather; we study, contemplate, discuss, and proclaim the word of God; we pray; we share communion; we gather at other tables for fellowship, food, and friendship; we teach our children and learn from them; we set aside partisanship; we look for the good in each other; we refuse to ignore injustice or neglect the vulnerable; we invite our neighbors to join us; we sing the songs that lift us, the songs that comfort us, the songs that challenge us; we hear the harmonies that shape our hearts; and we promise to do it all again seven days hence.

But what if the state closed the church; or the fire or the storm demolished this space down to its foundations? What if there were only five

folks left, with two of them in the hospital. What if ... What would we do? The exact same things. For as Jesus said, the kingdom, his kingdom is still emerging (being born, or as Jesus said, feeling those first birth pangs) even as our kingdoms fall apart.

I did tour a number of majestic European churches last spring in spite of the whole mystery of non-churchgoing Americans traipsing across Europe to tour churches that few local people attend. The churches we toured were indeed glorious, but guess what? The photos in my memory are all mixed up, and I can't tell them apart ... well, except for one. On Pentecost Sunday I gathered with the others for the day's tour, but hearing church bells in the background, I snuck away from the group and dashed up to the cathedral as the congregation was singing the first hymn.

What I saw and experienced inside blew me away. Everybody talks about how the church has basically died in Europe, but entering the cathedral in Regensburg, Germany, it was standing room only and the rafters were vibrating with the organ, choirs, and congregation singing in celebration of God's Holy Spirit. Being Pentecost, there was a whole section reserved for people of all ages joining the church, many of them young

adults accompanied by friends or family members serving as shepherds and supporters, ushering them forward as they made their profession of faith, many with their cheeks glistening with the tears of gratitude and grace. I don't remember all that much about the sanctuary, and I certainly don't speak German, but there was no doubt, I was in church that day and Christ's Spirit was in the house. Christ's church is alive as God's kingdom continues to be born in hearts wherever love takes root, whether the cathedrals rise or fall. Your life, our life together, does not need to be defined by the chaos creators out there. As Jesus said, "In the world you will have trouble, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world." Amen.