

Title: What Large Buildings!  
Text: Mark 13: 1 – 8  
Date: November 18, 2018

There is a certain irony that we sometimes miss when we only read the scripture as distinct, segmented stories. Last week when we were in Mark 12 we focused on Jesus denouncing the scribes, but we skipped over the next few verses and the story of the widow's offering. (I would like to give myself partial credit, however, for touching on that in our First Pew segment last week.)

In this story, despite the fanfare of the rich man's contribution, we have the story of the poor widow making her contribution of two small copper coins. While there is clearly a "teaching moment" in highlighting her generosity, there is also a perhaps unintended reminder that often these grand buildings and institutions were built upon the sweat and exploitation of the poor. The way the poor were exploited to build the grand structures in Jerusalem, and the pyramids in Egypt, was a pattern that was replicated in building many of the grand European cathedrals. This awareness apparently was not internalized by the disciples as they strolled out of the temple with Jesus, and then looked back over their shoulders.

A disciple makes small-talk with Jesus saying, "**Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large [or wonderful] buildings!**" (Mk. 13:1) The idolatry of grandeur is a perennial problem for us. It seems to be a constant in the human condition. We can't seem to bypass that which pulls us toward what is not ours, what seems out of reach, what appears to be so much better than what we have, even who we are.

Why is this? What is the attraction of these "large stones"? What do these large stones represent? Power and wealth? Achievement? Accomplishment? The amazement of this lone disciple captures our true orientation. How quickly and easily we find ourselves mesmerized by greatness beyond our grasp, and prosperity beyond our perceivable capability. And like this disciple, how rarely we look with a critical eye upon the abusive social systems and labor practices that produced such greatness.

Of course we know that Jesus was not quite so awestruck when he interrupted the oohs and aahs of these country bumpkin disciples by saying, "**Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.**" (13:2) He was turning this into more of a teaching moment than they could have begun to imagine.

In fact, we are having a little taste here of apocalyptic literature, a genre of religious writing dealing with a revelation or unveiling or uncovering of things not previously known or perceived, particularly as it relates to the end times. Now if you want more of a taste of apocalyptic literature I would direct you to chapters 7 -12 of the Book of Daniel, or the Book of Revelation.

Here, however, is what some scholars refer to as a "little apocalypse." Jesus says, "**Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.**" This calls for a complete reframing of all impresses us – *all* that we view as grand or wonderful. "**All will be thrown down.**" All. What does Jesus include in that "**all**"? The Temple, yes. But everything else, too? Governments? Palaces? Military forts? Impressive corporate headquarters and historic landmarks? Will all be thrown down? Why? When? How? To what end? What remains? What comes next? As severe and terrifying as apocalyptic literature can sound, I would contend that such a view can also be a gift. More on that later.

Apocalyptic literature is often written in turbulent times. Mark actually wrote this text many years after the death of Jesus, and this text was first heard during the period of the Jewish-Roman War of 66-70 CE. Ultimately the temple was demolished in this war, never to be rebuilt. While we can't know for sure, when Mark wrote this text, the temple may already have been destroyed . . . or its destruction may still have loomed in the future. Apocalyptic literature forces us to ask the big questions in turbulent times. Poet William Butler Yeats captured this sense of innocence lost in his description of the end times in the opening lines of his poem "The Second Coming":

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned.

I could not blame someone for feeling like we are living in apocalyptic times. The recent climate report that detailed how we are about to fall off a global warming cliff alarms me. The images of starving children in Yemen, babies of skin and bones, alarms me. Reading stories of people risking their lives, leaving all they have, walking to our border in order to escape poverty and violence and terror, alarms me. Another mass shooting and another and another, alarms me. I am alarmed when truth is called a lie, and a lie is called the truth. I am nothing but alarmed right now, and this promise that we read of in verse 26 of **"the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory"** doesn't help a lot right now. Despite all this, we hear Jesus' words in verse 7: **"do not be alarmed"**? Go figure.

Ched Myers offers some interesting perspective on all this in *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*. (Orbis Books) Written in 1988 this book was one of the earliest commentaries to take an empire-critical view - a view that is now widely accepted. When Mark wrote this passage, pressure was being placed on this new faith community to join the battle. Resistance fighters were going through the Palestinian countryside calling on all Jews to join this final battle, this was what would bring the end, the goal of the age, namely the salvation and restoration of God's people. Not only was this goal alluring, but failure to join its pursuit would leave this community open to persecution at the hands of the resistance forces. They would be considered traitors to their own people. This early faith community had a lot of soul-searching to discern between the ends and the means. What was their ultimate goal? The resistance fighters needed an answer!

While you and I are trying to figure this out, mindful that "the resistance" presents itself in a wide array of guises, consider the words of Richard Rohr: **"The necessary detachment from this ugly and injurious present political climate depends upon our inner attachment to the mystery of God's unbounded grace and divine, creative love. That is the foundation from which we can witness to truth, nurture community, and build essential bonds of solidarity with those who suffer. More than ever, politics which offers redemptive hope will begin with mysticism."**

Nadia Bolz-Weber reminds us that the ultimate point of apocalyptic literature is not simply to scare the bejesus out of you. She says **"Apocalyptic literature existed to proclaim a big, hope-filled idea that dominant powers are not ultimate powers. Empires fall. Tyrants fade. Systems die. God is still around."** You get that? Jesus says, **"Do not be alarmed."**

The apocalypse reveals or uncovers what has been there all along. Simply one of many possible examples: The “Me Too” movement is simply uncovering and exposing what has been going on all along. The ends of the apocalypse are not detached from “the real world.”

With that in mind, and recognizing that Advent is sneaking up on us, let me fold in something you may never have considered before as apocalyptic literature. Mary sang this song prior to the birth of Jesus:

“My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

...  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1)

So as you gather around the table this Thanksgiving, may your conversation be apocalyptic. Though it may feel like the end of world, set an example by not being alarmed. Don't just pray for those less fortunate, but ask questions, uncover the reasons why the poor are still with us. Carry in your being the certainty that dominant powers are not ultimate powers. Tyrants fade. God is still around.

Amen.

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!”<sup>1</sup> Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

<sup>2</sup>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?”<sup>3</sup> Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. <sup>4</sup>Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. <sup>5</sup>When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. <sup>6</sup>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 birth pangs.