

“ROCK SOLID”

Mark 13:1-8

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My previous congregation held a small piece of property in Harriman State Park. It was the congregation's last remaining piece of real estate, because in the 1960s, they had decided to sell their crumbling cathedral-size building to a developer and become a “church without walls,” renting space from other congregations. This little piece of property was administered by a small board that included church members and people who had no affiliation with the church but had some connection with the property, including a gentleman who used to take his family up to stay in the little cabin there. He was a photographer, with no particular interest in religion, and he didn't know much about the church. One day, we were making conversation, and one of us mentioned something about the church's history, the old cathedral-style building, and so on, and he said, “Wait. THIS is the church that used to be the big building in Columbus Circle?” Yes, we said, it was.

At the next meeting, he brought in a set of photographs. He had been walking around the city one day in 1970 or so, and saw a demolition crew working on that great big building. He didn't know the first thing about the church, or that years later he would be taking his children to camp at a cabin owned by the same congregation that had sold the building. He just saw a grand old cathedral, and a demolition crew, and so he went in with his camera. In some of the photos, sunlight streams into the sanctuary through yawning holes in the ceiling and gaps where stained glass windows used to be. The altar stones are shattered, the pews removed. The decommissioned sanctuary is being torn to the ground, the spaces where people were baptized, married, buried. The pulpit, the font, the table. The space that once held Christmas Eve carol services and Easter Sunday lilies and trumpets stands open to the elements. It is a moment in time, captured before the whole thing is taken down to the ground, and an office tower goes up where it used to be.

Today's Gospel reading takes us to the last week of Jesus's life. He has been teaching in the temple, where the crowd is delighted and the religious authorities are ever more indignant, and now as they are leaving, the disciples turn to look back at the space they have been in. "Look teacher," they exclaim, "What large stones and what large buildings!" It's an odd, incongruous kind of thing to say – Jesus has been teaching and preaching, critiquing and needling the powers that be, sharing dark and ominous teachings, and now, as they depart, the disciples are marveling at the architecture? I wonder whether they were uncomfortable with some of Jesus' more difficult teachings, trying to transition away from the heavier topics to lighter chit-chat, just as we might make conversation about the weather, our daily schedules, our surroundings. Or maybe they were uneasy reflecting on the great powers that built such magnificent structures, and the itinerant preacher they were following who was challenging them. In any case, Jesus responds: "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

The next scene takes place in private, when they have returned to the Mount of Olives just outside the city. The four disciples who are closest to him ask when these things are going to take place. They're asking about when the temple will be destroyed, but they're also asking more generally, I would assume, about the end of days. Jesus doesn't answer in either respect – and while we all still wonder and worry about the second, we now know that the destruction of the temple happened in 70 AD, when it was destroyed by the Romans as a way of quelling an insurrection in Jerusalem not so different from the one that the officials worried Jesus was starting. What Jesus does say is that terrible things will happen, and that the disciples should not be afraid. There will be wars and rumors of wars, he says. Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes. There will be famines. In the midst of this, he says, do not be led astray by false Messiahs, by people who proclaim themselves as savior.

This passage comes from what is known as the "little apocalypse" of the Gospel of Mark. In this section of the story of the life of Jesus, Jesus's ministry of teaching and healing is coming to an end, and he is preparing for his passion – his trial, suffering, and crucifixion at the hands of the Roman authorities. Jesus is promising his followers that the darkness and ugliness and suffering and evil that lie ahead of them are not the end of the story, but the beginning. Preparing for his death, ending his earthly ministry, he speaks of catastrophic and terrifying events, the shaking of

the earth and the collapse of the great buildings and institutions of society; but he describes these events as not the end of things, but the beginnings of the birth pangs – a new thing being born.

It brings us face to face with questions about where we put our faith, where we put our trust. Look at these great stones, and these great buildings, the disciples say. And Jesus responds, that is all temporary. It is not permanent. We cannot trust in it. It is coming down.

For the temple to fall was nearly unimaginable – until it happened, just as Christ said it would. We have our own modern institutions and buildings and structures that seem permanent and immutable to us. What are the great stones and great buildings in our own time and place? What are the things we cannot imagine society surviving without? Is it the banking system? The American government? Is it this church specifically, or Protestant Christianity in general? Or perhaps it is about the way we live our lives – fossil fuels, consumer goods, the lifestyle that seems now like the natural and only way of things, that was unimaginable even a generation or two ago. What are the great stones that seem so permanent to us, but are in fact temporary?

Whatever they are, Jesus reminds us that human structures, human institutions, human endeavors, are for a season. They rise and they fall, they begin and they end, they come and go. But the love of God endures forever. And sometimes when the walls around us are crumbling, it seems like a disaster, but if we can resist the impulses of fear and panic, if we can trust, we see that God is bringing forth a new thing.

Think of the ways the walls crumbled to dust in the Protestant Reformation, the way the earth shook during revolutions that changed the ways societies govern themselves, the way the ground trembled in movements for civil rights – the ways that what society had regarded as permanent and immutable was revealed as temporary, the ways the great stones of human institutions tumbled down and new things took shape. Think of what you would have said if two years ago someone told you that we would close our sanctuary for over a year; that school children would take the bus home one Friday and not re-enter the building for six months; think of the things we thought were unchangeable until suddenly they were not. Through it all, the love of God has remained rock solid.

On our bulletin cover today we have an image of the interior of Notre Dame de Paris after the April 2019 fire. I've been there a couple times – it is breathtaking in its scale, its grandeur, its

beauty and its age. Construction began on Notre Dame in 1163, and was largely completed by 1260. I thought of it as I heard Jesus' apocalyptic predictions for the Jerusalem temple. A massive restoration effort is underway to restore Notre Dame to its former glory. Nothing is forever, but this house of God is not done yet, if the people for whom it is sacred have anything to say about it.

Jesus was almost right about those great stones of the Jerusalem temple – but not quite, at least for now. A few were left after the destruction of 70 AD, and they are still there. They are known as the western wall or the wailing wall, one fragment of one wall that was left standing when the Romans demolished the rest of the temple. They are now Judaism's most sacred holy place. I visited the western wall, back in 2011, as I was traveling around Israel. The area bustled with many Jews and some Christians and a few non-religious tourists, and a sense of awe and devotion, mixed with a little bit of sorrow. I stood at the wall, and touched those ancient stones, the few that were left, and as is the custom, I tucked folded scraps of paper into the gaps in the wall – my own prayer requests, and prayer requests I was carrying with me written by congregants. So much has changed since Jesus and the disciples looked at the temple with awe and trepidation. But some things have not changed: God's love has not changed. The Good News of Jesus Christ has not changed. And humanity has not changed – we are still here, sometimes marveling at the wrong things, sometimes revering the wrong things, sometimes focused on the wrong things, but seeking God nonetheless. I stood at the western wall – what great stones – alongside women of other faiths, and I wondered what needs and worries had brought them to the wall that day, what private tragedies, what secret hopes, what crumbling walls or birth pangs. And shoulder to shoulder, we placed our hands on those ancient stones and prayed.

The buildings have been torn down. And the world continued and continues to be full of wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines, and people who promise cheap salvation and easy fixes and power and glory and success. But Jesus said that when we see all these things, we should not be afraid. We should not be despondent. We should not be troubled. The walls might crumble, but the God we worship is rock solid. And the beginning is near.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.