

The Urgencies That Deserve to Claim You

Mark 13:1-8 and Hebrews 10:11-25

On Wednesday mornings, I get together with the Worship Connection group to delve into and discuss the scripture readings for the upcoming Sunday. It's an opportunity to dig deeper into the passages and to engage in dialogue about what we read. An opportunity that a sermon alone doesn't always provide. We try to remember the importance of not only being attentive to what is going on *in the story*—the actions and reactions of the characters on the page—but also what the story might say to those who are *in front of the story*. People like us, who encounter the passage years, decades or even millennia after it has taken place. We try to experience the Bible by entering into the story and living it in that moment frozen in time. But we inevitably interpret the story through our own present context.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus and his disciples have arrived in Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. Based on what we know about these disciples, some, if not most of them were simple folks from the less cosmopolitan region of Galilee. As they stand before the Temple, they express out loud their sense of awe at its beauty and grandeur. But Jesus sees something different. "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left on another; all will be thrown down."

The disciples are shocked at Jesus' remark. To place their confusion into perspective, imagine a first-time tourist to New York City marveling at the World Trade Center Towers on September 10th, 2001 being told that those great structures would soon be a massive pile of rubble. Such a thing would be inconceivable. But anyone on the other side of 9/11 would know—not only the reality of that tragedy—but also its continuing repercussions.

Jesus made this dire prediction about the Temple days before his death on the cross around 30-33 A.D. But Mark's Gospel was not written until sometime around 66-70 A.D. In that interval a lot had happened in Jerusalem. In the region of Galilee, where Jesus had begun his ministry, a radical group of Jews known as the Zealots revolted against the Roman occupiers of their land. Their rallying cry was that if the Jewish people would rise up against the Romans, God would fight at their side and Rome would be defeated. After a series of Roman military victories against them, the surviving Zealots sought sanctuary in Jerusalem. While Roman legions surrounded and laid siege to the city, within the walls of Jerusalem a Jewish civil war broke out between the Zealots—who were convinced God wanted the Jews to fight—and the more moderate religious leaders, who sought a negotiated peace with Rome. Both parties in that civil war were so possessed by the conviction of the rightness of their position, that more Jews died at the hands of fellow Jews than by the swords, spears and arrows of the Romans. In 70 A.D., the Roman siege prevailed. Jerusalem fell. The Temple was destroyed. Just as Jesus had predicted.

From the vantage point of Christians at that time, whose first exposure to Jesus' warning might have come through reading Mark's recently composed Gospel, Jesus' words from the past were not a riddle to be figured out, as they were to those disciples who first heard him utter them. For them, Jesus' prophecy of the Temple's destruction was an earth-shattering, world ending, apocalyptic reality.

But Jesus' words still echo in *our* time, and for *all* time. When has there *not been* the wars and rumors of wars of which Jesus spoke? Where has there not been natural disasters, famines and other humanitarian crises? What about these words speak to *our* time? Sometimes it seems like history moves, less like a straight line, and more like a spiral, where we cycle in and out of times of hope and seasons of despair; of urgency and indifference.

John O'Donohue wrote a poem titled "A Blessing for the Traveler." It is meant to bless a journeyer who moves from place to place. But it is just as much a blessing for the traveling we do from one time or circumstance to another. A guide for plotting our own personal transitions and for navigating the shifting tides of global contexts in which we find ourselves.

The poem concludes with these verses:

A journey can become a sacred thing:

Make sure, before you go,

To take the time

To bless your going forth,

To free your heart of ballast

So that the compass of your soul

Might direct you towards

The territories of spirit

Where you will discover

More of your hidden life,

And the urgencies

That deserve to claim you.

In this short span of our journey through the 21st century we have already witnessed the worst terrorist attack on American soil, which propagated the longest war in American history. We are still climbing out from the shadow of a global pandemic, while being confronted by the rising tide of climate change. And we are as paralyzed by political division as were those besieged inhabitants of Jerusalem. Both dimensions of our journeys—the inner and outward, the now and the yet to be--exert certain urgencies upon us. Some urgencies do not deserve the claim they seek to place upon us. As Jesus warned his disciples, “many will come in my name and say ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray.” Often corrosive to both spirit and community and as easily transmissible as a virus, these urgencies confuse the compasses of our souls.

The urgencies that *do deserve* their claim upon us always resemble the urgencies that claimed Jesus’ priorities. They include the urgency of loving our neighbors as we love ourselves, even when we strongly disagree. The urgency of putting our faith not in what can be seen, but in what is unseen. The urgency of acting out of a hope for a better world even though the fabric of civilization seems to be unraveling. These urgencies deserve their claim on us because Jesus’ words from two thousand years ago, that the worst times are “but the birthpangs” of something new that is being born, ring just as true today as when he first spoke them. And what is being birthed through the pain and labor of history is nothing less than what we pray for when we say, “Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” When we put ourselves at the disposal of those urgencies, in some way, we serve as the instruments God uses to deliver the promised rebirth of humanity that began with Jesus.

As the author of Hebrews reminds us, “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And based on that hope let us consider how to unburden our hearts of the ballast of urgencies that don’t deserve a claim on us, that we may provoke one another to respond to the urgency of Jesus’ words; encouraging one another to deeds of love, compassion and justice.

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