

“Rebuilding the Temple”

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Dr. Frank J. Allen, Jr., Pastor

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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!”

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

3 When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, 4 “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?”

5 Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray.

6 Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray.

7 When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. 8 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 birthpangs.

TOO BIG A BUILDING

There was a church in Atlanta that was magnificent.
Large gray stones, an impressive sanctuary.

There was only one problem.

The church was located in a transitional neighborhood,
and they couldn’t attract enough members to even come close to filling that church.

A number of very talented young preachers came and tried.

In order to minimize the psychological effect of so many pews being empty, they put up banners to block off the back half of the church and encouraged people to sit up front.

They reached out to people that normally didn't go to church. They tried new programs.

This church was at every conference on church renewal. And often their enthusiastic new pastor would share what he or she was planning to do in order to revitalize this stately old church

But, try as they might, the results were always the same. The church didn't grow. Their preachers all grew frustrated with a lack of success and soon moved on to another place of service.

In this case a tall steepled church wasn't a blessing. It was a curse.

This large building became a nightmare to maintain. The sanctuary was way too large for the number of people who attended on Sunday morning.

Each Sunday was a reminder that they had failed. The church that they remembered no longer existed.

And yet, the old timers insisted on keeping it open. They remembered the days when the church was filled. And they dreamed of a day when it would return to its former glory.

I wonder if their devotion to the building hindered their ability to do ministry.

This beautiful old church building no longer served its purpose.

Perhaps this congregation needed to rethink ministry in a radical way.

Maintaining a large building might not have been the best way to use their resources.

NEW WORSHIPPING COMMUNITIES

Our denomination has been experimenting with new models of church development that are not so building dependent.

In fact, I am on a Presbytery commission that will create a new church in January. Hope Presbyterian meets in the cafeteria at the Lake Nona Middle School.

And this “soon to be church” has decided not to purchase land or build a church building.

This will enable them to have more money available for mission. I wonder if this might be a model for developing new churches in the future?

We refer to these groups as new worshipping communities.

And they can be formed in a number of ways.

Sometimes these worshipping communities are given a home in a church that already exists, such as the Korean and Brazilian congregations that worship in our sanctuary. But, sometimes these worshipping communities hold services in non-traditional locations like homes, schools or even restaurants.

This often enables us to reach people with the gospel that we normally wouldn't reach.

The biggest obstacle to doing this kind of ministry is tradition.

We are so used to going to church in a building with “big stones” that we can't wrap our minds around “doing church” in a nontraditional way or in a nontraditional location.

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

I was trained to be a minister in the 20th century.
But, much of what I learned no longer applies in the twenty first century.

The pace of change in our world is off the charts.

A friend loaned me a book about Christian leadership in uncharted territory.
And the big question that this book asks is this:

How can we lead the church when no one knows what's next?

The author argues that since our society is changing so fast that we need to be flexible and adapt to rapidly changing circumstances.

Since we don't know what the future holds,
we must be willing to make changes on the fly,
to be reborn in the face of new challenges.

I'm not so sure we in the church are so good at being flexible. Indeed,
sometimes we're quite the opposite.

But, I think the author of the book is right.
We do need to make changes in the church because the church of our
youth no longer exists.

The stones have been toppled, and we are in uncharted territory.

Don't misunderstand.
This doesn't mean that we change the gospel message
That message is an eternal word of grace.

But, we will have to adapt how we do ministry in a changing world.

Sometimes we will have to tear down our old way of thinking, those old
"temples",
in order to proclaim the gospel more effectively.

THE TEMPLE

Resistance to change is nothing new in the family of faith.
In Jesus' day this resistance to change took the form of the Temple.

The Temple was the focus of faith and worship.
It's size and glory represented the glory of God.

In their minds, faith couldn't exist without the Temple.

This particular Temple,
built by the crazy Herod family was indeed magnificent.
It was painstakingly constructed over many years
and was a symbol of God's Providential care.

When people looked at the Temple they thought of the "good old days"
when David and Solomon were king. When the people looked at the Tem-
ple they dreamed of "making Israel great again".

In our lesson for today the disciples reflect this common attitude.

They marvel at the majesty of the Temple and the surrounding buildings.
They say, "what large stones and what large buildings".

But, as we learned last week, greatness in the kingdom of God is not mea-
sured by the amount of our offerings, the length of our prayers and certainly
not the size of our buildings.

Greatness in the kingdom of God is measured by the size of our hearts.
Greatness in the kingdom of God is measured by compassion.

How do we treat the least and the lost?
That will tell us what we really believe and how much we really know about
God.

Sadly, many in Jesus' day had fallen short on that standard of measure.
And so Jesus speaks a word of judgment.

WHEN THE TEMPLE FALLS

“One day it’s all going to be torn down.
One day not one stone will be left here upon another”.

The disciples had fallen for what one commentator called “the idolatry of glamour”.

The “largest” ends up being a mission statement.

The “biggest” ends up being a vision statement.

Sometimes I wonder if we might buy into that same vision.

How do you measure faithfulness?

Sometimes the church says, “By being the biggest and the best”.

But, God was not pleased with that vision.

And because God was not pleased,

judgment was on the way.

One day the most magnificent symbol of their faith would be destroyed.

So, what will the people do when the Temple falls?

This is a hard passage to preach.

I don’t like to think about great buildings being torn down.

I don’t like to think about places of worship being destroyed.

I have a bit of personal experience on this one.

I think I may have mentioned this before.

Several years ago I watched an episode of TV show called “Black Dog Salvage”.

In this show some good old boys from Roanoke, Virginia travel to various locations in the area in order to salvage items from buildings that were going to be torn down.

I was shocked to see that in this particular episode the crew was going to salvage some items from the little Baptist Church of my youth.

Now to be fair, that church barely had enough members to survive long ago.

It was inevitable that one day something like this would happen.

But, to see the organ that my mother played ripped out of the building, to see the magnificent woodwork destroyed ...that was quite a shock.

This was the building where I was baptized as a child.
This was church where I officiated at my brother's wedding.

This was the place where I began to wonder about what it really meant to have faith.

That demolition represented more than just the destruction of a building.

It was the end of era.
The old had truly passed away in that place.
What I loved and remembered fondly was passing away.

As a nation, we know what its like to see large buildings destroyed.

For us, September 11, 2001 was the end of the era.
After 911 we saw the world in a different light.

Our country will never be the same.

Well, something similar happened to the Jews.
But, the destruction they experienced was on an even larger scale.

Almost 40 years after the death of Jesus, the Romans would destroy Herod's Temple and much of Jerusalem.

And the Jews that survived would be scattered all over the ancient world.

Many Christians in the early church were Jewish Christians.

They didn't abandon the faith of their fathers and mothers.

They just decided to follow Jesus.

And so, when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed and Jews were scattered all over the ancient world, this was a problem for many Christians as well.

MAKING SENSE OF THE FALL

These early Christians were among those who had lost everything.

They too asked, “Where is God in all this destruction? How do we understand life when the Temple falls?”

But, then they remembered what Jesus said to his disciples outside the Temple.

This time of destruction and dislocation was not unexpected.

Jesus not only predicted that the Temple would be destroyed; he also predicted the reason it would be destroyed.

False messiahs would lead God’s people astray.

It happened.

False messiahs advocated rebellion against Rome.

And the results were disastrous.

There’s a word of warning here for us as well.

We too are subject to the danger of false Messiahs.

Even today there are those who lead us astray, falsely claiming the authority of Jesus.

You see, not everyone who uses the name of Jesus is with him.

The Bible speaks of wolves in sheep’s clothing, people who pretend to be people of faith and yet promote something quite different.

And how do you detect these wolves?

They say and do things that contradict the teachings of Jesus.

Jesus clearly said that God's kingdom was not of this world.

It would not be a kingdom based on power and military might.
It would not be a kingdom based upon lording it over others.

False messiahs will always claim otherwise.
False messiahs put their trust in big buildings, and other symbols of power and glory.

Be warned.
The destruction of the temple and the Jewish nation was due to putting trust in the message of a false messiah.

And we face the same danger.

NEW BIRTH

But, there is reason to have hope.
Even in an age filled with false messiahs, disasters, and exile, our God still reigns.

According to the Bible, this time of peril will not have the final word.

Even our amped up ability to wage war and create terror and abuse the earth is not a sign of the end.

It is a sign of something new being born.
You see, God's ability to save is greater than our ability to destroy.

Yes, there will be wars and rumors of war.
Yes, there will be tragic natural disasters.

But, don't despair when you see those things.
They aren't the end.
They are just the beginning.

Look again at what Jesus said in our lesson for today.
Jesus didn't say that these terrible events are signs of the end.
These terrible events are signs of the beginning.

Specifically, he said that they are the birth pangs of a new creation. (Mark 13:8)

Jesus is giving his disciples a promise.
The world will not end as a result of human folly or natural disaster.

The disasters of this present age are but a precursor of the age to come.
There's a new world, a new birth coming.
And nothing will be able to stop it.

The apostle Paul expressed a similar idea in his letter to the Romans.
He wrote that the whole creation has been "groaning in labor pains" in anticipation of God's kingdom.
(Romans 8:22-23)

The tragedies, the natural disasters and wars and rumors of war create a longing in the world.
These things cause us to realize that what we're doing now isn't working, and we desperately want something else.

According to the Bible, what we long for is the Kingdom of God, the new creation.

The troubles of this world are the birth pangs.
And just as birth pangs are followed by the wonderful event of the birth of a child;
so the struggles of this world will be followed by the coming of God's kingdom.

The coming of this kingdom is sure.
Indeed, we repeat this promise each week:
"Thy kingdom come;
thy will be done.
On earth as it is in heaven."

When we pray that prayer, we acknowledge that things on earth are not as they should be.

But, we also express our faith in the promise that things can change, that the kingdom of God can come to earth.

His will can be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Christians are an optimistic people, not because of what we can do but because of what God has promised.

EYES TO SEE

But, before we can get a glimpse of this kingdom, we need eyes to see.

Passages like this one are often labeled apocalyptic.
What do you think about when you think of the apocalypse?

Many of us think of end of the world stuff.

In our culture we think of zombies
or battles between Marvel superheroes and the forces of evil.

We think of books and movies that sensationalize what the end will be like.
We don't want to be "Left Behind" on the "Late Great Planet Earth".

We think of timelines and threats.
And so forth.

But, I learned this past week that the word "apocalypse" actually means an "uncovering".

It means to experience fresh sight.
It is to see the world as we have never seen it before.

In the end the apocalypse is not about destruction.
It's about being born again.

What Jesus says in our lesson for today is apocalyptic.
It's apocalyptic because it helps us experience fresh sight.

He invites disciples to look
beyond the grandeur of the Temple,
and envision a different future.

Jesus invites us to remember that:
God is greater than mortar and stone.
God is greater than any nation.
God is greater than all our hopes and dreams.

And sometimes, in order to see that glory,
our old “temple” has to be destroyed.

One definition of idolatry is to
put our faith in things that are temporary.
We cannot see the glory of God when we our eyes are fixed on things that
will one day pass away.

We need a hope that is eternal.
We need a Temple that is not built by human hands.

Barbara Brown argues that disillusionment is essential to the Christian life.

“Disillusionment is, literally, the loss of an illusion
— about ourselves, about the world, about God —

And while it is almost always a painful thing,
it is never a bad thing,
to lose the lies we have mistaken for the truth.”

And God has revealed the truth,
God has revealed the nature of God’s kingdom in Jesus.

What will the kingdom look like?
It won’t be a kingdom based on really big buildings and other symbols of
power.
God’s kingdom will not be like the kingdoms of this world.

When the temple falls, when the earth shakes,
when nations rage, a new kind of kingdom is born
...a kingdom based upon mercy and forgiveness.

In the gospels we get a glimpse of what that kingdom might look like.

It will be like the sacrifice of a poor widow who gives all she has out of love.
It will be like a blind man who has his sight restored, and follows Jesus down the road.

It will be like a Savior praying as he is crucified, "Father, forgive them."

A new Temple is being constructed to replace the old.

But, this Temple is not made of impressive stones.

This Temple is made of people who have decided to follow Jesus in acts of mercy and compassion.

Paul in his letter to the Corinthians wrote that the church is the Body of Christ and each one of us is a part of it.

The true Temple will never fall.

The true Temple is in the hearts of those who trust in Jesus Christ and seek to follow him every day.

The true Temple is in the lives of those who come together to worship him and honor him with their deeds.

So let us rebuild the Temple together.

Let us be who we are called to be, living symbols of faith, a foreshadowing of the Kingdom that comes.

And when the nations rage, and disaster hits and the Temple falls, remember this:

This is just the beginning of the Kingdom that comes.

Amen.