

**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>2</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>3</sup> When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple,  
Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately,

<sup>4</sup> "Tell us, when will this be,  
and what will be the sign  
that all these things are about to be accomplished?"

<sup>5</sup> Then Jesus began to say to them,  
"Beware that no one leads you astray.

<sup>6</sup> Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!'  
and they will lead many astray.

<sup>7</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>8</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.

**“It’s the End of the World as We Know It, and I Feel Fine”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham**  
**The Rev. Amy Morgan**  
**November 15, 2009**

Don’t give money to the church.

That’s right. I mean it.

I don’t want you to give money to the church, anymore.

In fact, I don’t want you to go to church, either.

Don’t look around at the bulletin boards

and get excited about all the great programs we’ve got going on.

Don’t find your way to your favorite pew at 8:30 / 10:00 on Sunday morning.

Don’t appreciate the beautiful music or the inspiring sermon.

This is not reverse psychology.

I’m seriously asking us all to stop *doing* church.

*Why?* you might ask?

Did you *listen* to the scripture passage this morning?

This text, and the verses that follow,

are often referred to as Mark’s small apocalypse.

Jesus is privately telling his disciples

about what to expect in the end times.

At the end of the chapter,

he encourages his disciples to “beware!” and “keep awake!”

In the context of the end of the world,

going about the business of doing church is not very well advised.

If the temple is going to come crashing down,

if false leaders, earthquakes, wars, and famines

are only the *beginning* of our troubles,

then what good are steeples and programs and nursery schools?

If the world is really coming to an end,

what do we care about Confirmation classes or Advent or pledge cards?

The end is near!

We might have better things to do!

Now, rather than get all worked up about the end of the world,

we *can* read Jesus’ dire predictions in its historical context.

Not long after Jesus’ death, a war broke out between the Jews and the Romans,

and the temple Jesus spoke of in this passage was destroyed.

Many scholars believe Mark’s gospel was written

either during or after the Jewish-Roman war.

So really, this scripture simply

reflects the experience of Christians

at the time the gospel was written.

In this context,

we can completely ignore its forecast of devastations.

In the end, I see three ways this passage gets interpreted today.

One is to be convinced that Jesus is speaking of a fast-approaching  
and very real end game.

A second interpretation

is to believe there is possibly going to be a final end of some sort,  
but to dismiss it as an unknowable mystery  
that we need not be concerned about.

Lastly, we could disregard these predictions  
as a product of uncertain and dangerous times  
in an historical past  
that have no relevance for the present.

One commentary remarks that this chapter of Mark's gospel  
"speaks to those who expect too much  
and those who expect too little.

It is especially pertinent for those  
who have forgotten to expect anything at all."

This passage is all about expectation.

When we read this passage,  
what do we expect will happen?

Do we expect too much?  
too little?

or nothing at all?

One of my favorite comics

has a picture of a street corner prophet holding up a sign that says,  
"Jesus is coming: Look busy."

This comic message points fun at those  
who "expect too much" from Mark's apocalypse.

Those of us in this camp  
would predict that Jesus' return will happen any day now  
and would use it as a way to frighten people  
into particular beliefs and actions.

We might look busy saving souls and declaring judgment,  
but are we really about the work of God?

We in this group are more concerned  
with interpreting current events into predictions of the end  
than we are about what Jesus told his followers to do in the meantime.

But this message also has something to say  
to those who “expect too little” from this passage.  
We in this group would assume that  
since we can’t predict the timing of Jesus’ return,  
we ought not to concern ourselves with the possibility.  
Those of us in this category  
are busy making sure the church will last long enough  
to survive until Jesus comes.  
We are rebuilding the temple that was destroyed  
by trying to put God into a sacred box –  
comprehensible, accessible, and easily transmitted.  
This group is busy believing the right things,  
creating sound doctrine,  
rather than doing what Jesus told his followers to do in the meantime.

And then there are those who “expect nothing at all.”  
Those of us in this group  
would write off these predictions as a product of the past,  
belonging to the past.  
The apocalypse already happened,  
the temple was destroyed,  
and the future belongs to those who create it.  
Here, we find those of us who don’t believe there will be an “end of the world.”

Ironically, this group of people  
tends to act like the world is coming to an end all the time.  
Running late for a meeting represents the end of the world.  
The world is over if we don’t get the raise we expected or the job we’d hoped for.  
When there is no end of the world,  
changes in the routine,  
anything that upsets the institution,  
anything that jeopardizes the future as *we*’ve planned it,  
becomes the end of the world.

Expectations are important,  
because they influence how we feel,  
how we see the world,  
and ultimately, what we do.

Those of us who expect a real end of the world  
might feel frightened at the prospect.

There’s plenty to be fearful of here.  
Earthquakes, wars, and famine  
don’t tend to inspire hope in many of us.  
But these are just your generic prophetic predictions of doom.  
The really interesting piece in this part of the scripture passage  
is the destruction of the temple.

Jesus, in this story,  
    is leaving the temple in Jerusalem.  
He's in Jerusalem for the last time.  
    He has come here to die.  
Some seriously crazy stuff is going on.  
    He's cursing fig trees and turning over tables in the temple.  
He keeps telling his disciples that some seriously bad stuff is about to happen to him.  
    These are really dark times.

So Jesus and his disciples go walking out of the temple,  
    and one of the disciples tries to lighten the mood  
        by remarking on the impressive architecture.

Jesus is not only unimpressed,  
    but he takes this opportunity to once again  
        pronounce gloom and doom  
            with the prediction that the magnificent temple  
                will undoubtedly become a pile of rubbish.

The next episode of our story  
    finds Jesus sitting on the Mount of Olives,  
        *opposite* the temple.

For the earliest readers of this gospel,  
    the message here is clear.  
Jesus is sitting in opposition to the *institution* of religion  
    as first century Jews knew it.  
For them, God is housed, literally,  
    in the temple.  
        The temple is the center of Jewish life.  
But Jesus has come to unleash God's power in the world.  
    God will no longer be contained,  
        set apart by a holy veil.  
In pronouncing the downfall of the temple,  
    Jesus is proclaiming the end of the world as first century Jews know it.

Now this is supposed to be a good thing.  
The Son of Man  
    coming in glory to rule the world  
        is a good thing, right?

Sure. But it's also frightening.

How do they know where God is if there's no temple?  
    How do they know God is residing with them?  
        Where do they go to interact with God?  
            How can they make atonement for sins?

Losing the institution of religion is a scary thing.

When the Reformers did away with purgatory in the 16<sup>th</sup> century,  
there was a sudden surge in ghost sightings.  
If loved ones who had died could not reside in purgatory,  
and weren't fit for heaven or hell,  
where could they go?  
Back to earth to roam around until other arrangements could be made, I guess.

Perhaps we don't hold to rituals or superstitious beliefs,  
but we still fear the loss of religious institution.  
We want to sing the hymns that gave us comfort in our youth.  
We want to participate in the traditional activities  
that give meaning to the seasons of our lives.  
We want to know that the faith of those who have gone before us  
is the faith of tomorrow.

Jesus' message of the destruction of the temple,  
the destruction of the institution,  
is a frightening prospect.

But maybe we don't expect there will be an end of the world as we know it.

Only a little over half of all Americans think there will be an end of the world.  
And if we don't think it will happen in our generation,  
what does it matter to us anyway?  
Mark's apocalypse speaks profoundly to us, too.

There are two very vivid images of Jesus in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark  
that may well be the end of the world as we know it.  
First, as we discussed earlier,  
Jesus sits in opposition to the institution of religion.  
Secondly, at the end of the chapter,  
Jesus is seen coming in glory.  
There's a very clear picture here  
of the institution failing in the face of Jesus' glory and power.

We've heard plenty about failing institutions in recent years.  
The failure of the financial institution;  
the failure of major corporations, including many of our employers;  
the failure of our health care institutions;  
the failure of the Tigers at the end of the season;  
the Lions;  
our religious institutions have been in decline for many years now.

Where is my security if it's not in my bank, or my company, or my health care?  
Where is our future if our children aren't well-educated?  
Where is our church if it's not housed in this building?  
Where is our God without hymns and robes, prayers and pews?

All of these things speak to institutions that fail,  
and all of these failures are frightening to us.

Unless, of course, our hope is not in institutions to begin with.

Because hope in an institution is not really hope at all, is it?

I mean, an institution is set up to keep things the same.  
Institutions are about standing the test of time,  
not expecting the end of time.

They are in direct opposition to  
radical change, originality, and creativity.

Which is not to say that some institutions  
haven't learned how to embrace these values.

But, by definition, institutions are created to keep something the way it is,  
to keep values, beliefs, or practices in place for generations.

But there's no hope in things that don't change.

Jesus, in his prediction of the temple's destruction,  
is talking about beginnings,  
about birth pangs.

He's not talking about the end of the world;  
just the end of the world as we know it.  
Something new will be born out of hard labor.

The end of the world as we know it is a hopeful future,  
full of possibility.

It isn't limited by what we can or can't do.

None of the constraints of the present world apply.  
Institutions don't house our security, our future, or our God.  
In the face of the end of the world as we know it,  
we should, as the R.E.M. song goes,  
feel fine.

We should feel hope.

When the world as we know it comes crashing down around us,  
our only hope for survival is located outside that world as we know it.

Jesus sets himself up in opposition to the failing temple  
as he gives his discourse about the end of the world as we know it  
so that his disciples, and the readers of Mark's gospel,  
can clearly see where their hope isn't  
and where their hope should be.

Hope in the end of the world as we know it  
is hope in Jesus Christ.  
But it isn't about *looking* busy  
believing in Jesus or *doing* church.  
It's about *being* busy,  
*being* the church.  
If we heed Jesus' instruction to his disciples to keep awake,  
if we live with expectation and hope in the glory of God's Son,  
we will keep ourselves busy about the work of God's world.

And *that*, my friends, is what we should give to.

We should give and live as people of hope,  
people who expect God to be more powerful than institutions,  
more glorious than anything we could imagine for ourselves.  
People of hope don't need to wait around for the end of the world  
to perceive the end of the world as we know it  
and live accordingly.

So I'm not backing down from my opening comments this morning.  
Don't give money to the church.  
Don't support an institution for the sake of its preservation.

*Do*, however, give of everything you have  
in a way that witnesses to your hope in Jesus Christ.  
That hope is alive and well here in this place –  
in the people,  
and the challenges we face together,  
and the praise we give to God in all that we do.

I encourage us all  
to give to hope in what God is doing here  
through the ministry partnership we have in Pontiac  
with Alcott Elementary School and Camp Hosanna.

Let's give to hope in what God is doing here  
through the many ways this church connects people to each other –  
in small groups, bible studies, and fellowship gatherings.

Let's give to hope in what God is doing here  
as our children grow closer to God,  
our youth give voice to their faith,  
and our whole community  
discovers deeper relationship with God and each other.

Don't *look* busy coming to church  
and appreciating what this institution has to offer  
in the way of routine and security.  
Be busy about the work of God,  
living for God's glory in the life of this community.  
Give and live radically,  
full of hope in the possibilities for God's work in this place.

At the end of the world as we know it,  
don't be caught worrying about the end of the world.  
And definitely don't be caught worrying  
about all those things we think are the end of the world and aren't.

Jesus has come.  
Jesus is coming –  
into the world and into our lives.  
Let's be people living in hope,  
not fear,  
busy about the work of God.

To whom we give glory forever. Amen.