

Sermon on Mark 13:1-8
24th Sunday after Pentecost, November 15, 2009
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

It was just too big too fall....down, I mean. The great Temple of Jerusalem, built by King Herod, one of the wonders of the ancient world, had been built to last – and to impress! And it did impress Jesus’ disciples when Jesus went to teach there, and as they walked out, down the Temple steps, the disciples looked back and said, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” It was an amazing feat of architecture, a symbol of God’s power, dwelling with the people. It was also the center of their religion, the place where people came every year on pilgrimage, to bring birds or animals to be sacrificed on its altar as offerings to God, for the forgiveness of their sins. What great stones, indeed!

But what was Jesus’ answer? He said to them, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” It was true. The Great Temple of Jerusalem was doomed. Less than forty years later, the Romans had burned Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple, tearing it down brick by brick, till nothing remained. Does this make Jesus prophetic, a predictor of the future? Maybe. But what Jesus did know was this: the Temple was no longer fulfilling its function as a center for worship of the living God, and had become a symbol of the religious oppression that its priests leveled on the people, by requiring sacrifices and burnt offerings, as well as a Temple tax, to support its administration and many priests. Too little of its offerings went to the poor. So when the people revolted against the Romans a few decades later, and holed up in Jerusalem as the Roman army laid siege, the Temple was merely one more great building to be destroyed. And so when the Romans burned Jerusalem in 70 A.D., they also tore down the Temple walls, until no stone was left upon another. Too big to fall? Hardly.

Today we read this story and can’t help but think of the great buildings and monuments to human creativity that we have created – thinking they, too, will stand forever. I remember as a kid going to downtown Minneapolis and looking up in the sky to see tall buildings like the Foshay Tower. Man, I thought it was huge! Well, it’s still there, but doesn’t seem so large, and other buildings tower over it. But skyscrapers still impress us, and we think these human-made structures will last forever. It wasn’t too long ago that the twin towers of the World Trade Center stood 100 stories tall over New York City. Maybe we didn’t think they would stand forever, but the whole world was shocked when they came down in the terrorist attack on 9-11. The *Titanic* was a vessel that was too big, too well built, a ship that was “unsinkable” – and went down after hitting an iceberg on

its maiden voyage. One year ago our nation experienced a tremendous economic downturn, which resulted in some very large banks and brokerage houses like Lehman Brothers going out of business. Our government got involved in bailouts of some of these banks and financial institutions this past year because they were considered “too big to fail.” Not that they won’t fail – some still might fail – but they were deemed *too vital and important* to fail – so government intervened.

So maybe this helps us know a bit what it was like for the people of Jerusalem to think of their Temple coming down – or how they felt when their city and their temple were destroyed by the Romans. It must have been traumatic, as well as unthinkable. But it happened. The Temple was not too big to fall.

So our scripture texts today talk about the “last days”, which the prophet Daniel calls a time of great persecution and anguish for all people on earth. In those days humans will see the futility of putting our trust in great buildings or institutions built by human hands. People of faith are reminded that our ultimate trust and hope is in the Lord God who made us, and gives us salvation. For God isn’t causing the persecution and anguish; but God will lead us through it, and promises to lead us to everlasting life.

Many people have wondered over the centuries when these days will come. There is even a new movie coming out called *2012*, saying this is the year Mayan astrologers said the world will end. In the gospel, Jesus’ disciples came to him and asked when these things would be accomplished, and what signs there would be. Jesus would just say that there will always be wars, and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines, but that doesn’t mean that this is the end. No one knows the day or the time, not even God’s Son. Only God knows. So all we can do is keep faith in God, and wait for the kingdom. I think there is an important message of hope and comfort underneath these verses describing such apocalyptic times to come. We hear them in the second lesson, in the letter to the Hebrews:

“Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, no neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

So the real question is, how should we live as people of faith, when we know that one day we shall all die? How should we, the baptized, live out our promises faithfully? How should the Church act in times of persecution or economic hardship? Should we give in to depression and fear, and retreat within ourselves? The gospel says “no”. Jesus our Lord gives us a great alternative to fear of death, by embracing life with faith and courage. There is a great quote of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther, who once was asked what he would do if the world were about to end. Would he retreat into prayer, or hide in the sanctuary of the Church? No, Luther said, “*I would plant a tree.*”

I think this is a brilliant answer, showing the hope of faith in God's future even when life in this world seems hopeless. It is the Christian answer of faith.

This leads us today to what this means for Christian stewardship. I have a similar question: if the world were to end tomorrow (or soon), what would you give – to others, to your neighbor, to God, to the Church? If you knew your life were going to end in a year (but you still had your health), what would you do? How would you love? How would you worship today, if you knew this would be your last time in worship? How would you say goodbye to your family, if this would be your last goodbye? What would you give, if this were to be your final offering? If nothing else, it would be far more important than if you thought “I can say goodbye tomorrow, or I can come to worship next month, or I can give later, at the end of the year, before taxes are due. Usually, though, we lack this urgency.

Is it possible to retain some of this urgency, this spirit to our giving, to our worship, and our relationships on a daily basis? Maybe not – the tension might be too great. But what, then, are we missing? Certainly, you don't want to wait to tell your children or spouse you love them until the day you leave them forever! We want to say I love you every day! So, why not do it? It's like the old joke where Lena says to Ole, “Ole, why don't you ever tell me that you love me?” Ole replies, “I told you I loved you the day we were married. If anything changes, I'll let you know!” This is, of course, ridiculous, but sometimes our own communication skills are just as badly developed! We don't tell our loved ones we love them enough. We don't worship as often or as urgently as we could. We don't give to our neighbor, or to our God, as we would if we really made it the priority of faith that it is! So just do it, say it out loud, for we don't have much time.

So as we go through the days of our busy lives, these texts serve as a reminder of what is truly important: our relationships with God and with each other. To not be so impressed with the great buildings of our cities or the achievements of our nation, or what we can buy and possess for ourselves, that we forget that we are children of God, baptized in Jesus' name, who live for a purpose: to bear witness to the goodness of God and glorify God in all we say and do. In other words, *to love the Lord your God with all y our heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.*

So think about these things as you ponder your life during this worship service. Carry this message with you also as you leave this place and go out into the world this afternoon. Not by carrying signs that say “*The End is Near*” like some prophet of doom on the comics page. But in the way that you and I live, knowing that throughout our this world's turmoil, through the wars and rumors of wars, the conflicts and the suffering, our future has been assured by the grace and love of our God, who has sent his only Son to die to give the whole world life. So let's give generously of our time, talent, and treasure, to the glory of God.