

Larger Than Life!

Shepherd's Grace Church

November 18, 2012

Mark 13:1-8

¹As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!"²Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

³When 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?"⁵Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁶Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. ⁷When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. ⁸For 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 (Also Read 1Sam. 1: 4-20)

In the last two weeks we made a brief study of the book of Ruth. In that book, we were reminded of just how fragile the Kingdom of God is. God's Kingdom seems to rest on coincidence and chance. There is so much about it that seems out of control. If Naomi and her husband hadn't gone to a place they were not supposed to go, if Ruth hadn't defied Naomi and stayed with her, if Ruth hadn't gleaned in fields belonging to Naomi's relative, if Boaz had been unwilling to break tradition and be next of kin for Ruth then Ruth and Boaz might never have gotten together and the lineage of Jesus might never have been established. Five incidents of chance even in the short book of Ruth! What if even one of them had gone wrong? How can God work depending on such random outcome?

In today's Hebrew Bible lesson, we experience this sense of fragility again! God's Kingdom requires more than just a strong lineage. God's Kingdom requires those who are willing to work to reveal God's message, God's word! Today we meet Hannah, wife of Elkanah. She has been unable to conceive a child and is brutally tormented by Elkanah's other wife because of her inferiority. Hannah is devastated. The word used here in original Hebrew is the same as the word used to describe Cain's reaction when the Lord does not accept his offering. Her countenance has fallen! Cain in his case is tempted to sin, but Hannah is called to prayer!

As we think about the fragility of God's Kingdom, it is helpful to remember that inside the Kingdom, we all experience the freedom of choice God has given when he creates us in His image and likeness. (Gen. 1.26) If Hannah had chosen, she could have retaliated against her rival in evil and destructive ways. Cain

made that choice. Hannah, however chooses another route. She prays and God remembers her prayer! He remembers her fervent and frequent prayer and he responds. Many may wish for God's response, but most of us do not pray with the fervent persistence of Hannah! Perhaps there is a lesson to be learned here!

God will hear our prayers, but God answers them according to the desires of our heart! As we have learned recently and frequently in Mark's Gospel, God knows our heart and responds to the sincerity with which we come to Him. James and John came for their own gain, to sit at the right and left. Bartimaeus came, however wanting that which he had, his sight so that he might see Jesus and follow him along the way! God grants according to our willingness to be used for God's purposes! Our willingness is revealed in our obedience. Hannah was willing to be obedient. Ruth was willing to be obedient! The seeming coincidence in their actions was far from coincidence! As we shall see in this morning's Gospel lesson, There is still and even more to the building of God's Kingdom! God's Kingdom is larger than life! Larger even than life itself!

Sitting in the corner of a meticulously kept contemporary home in a very fashionable neighborhood was an old wooden table. The table showed the scars of years of neglect. It was scratched and stained and in serious disrepair. It looked completely out of place in the corner of a dining room that was otherwise immaculate! Each mealtime, an elderly man was ushered in to the dining room amidst the smells of freshly prepared foods. He was led away from the main table and toward the single stained wooden table in the corner of the room. As he sat down, he buried his head in his hands, unable to look at other people who were in the room with him. As he sat there, you could just begin to see the forming of a tear in his eye and gradually, the tear rolled, ever so slowly down his cheek.

I ask you now to hold the image of this man, this table, this home, this neighborhood carefully in your mind as we contemplate the Gospel lesson this morning that is shared with us from the evangelist Mark. As our story opens, one of the disciples remarks to Jesus as they are coming out of the temple about the marvel of construction of the temple and the buildings surrounding it. King Herod has engineered most of the construction and completed it as a testament to his greatness and to his architectural intelligence. The buildings are indeed awesome to behold.

We are not told where Jesus exits the temple, but perhaps he exits through the Rabbi's Tunnel. This tunnel leads through the lowest point of the temple and out into a courtyard adjacent to the modern day wailing wall. In the tunnel, one can clearly see the size of the stones used! They are enormous; many of them weighing in excess of several hundred tons. These stones have been cut from a quarry several miles from the temple sight and moved into position in the tunnel with such precision that even today, a person cannot place a single sheet of paper in the space between the stones. Construction is an ancient miracle and still today a modern wonder! It is no wonder the disciple is impressed!

Outside the tunnel, the walls of the temple are visible along with many other buildings in the ancient city of Jerusalem. The buildings are beautiful and their architecture is the envy of Jesus' contemporary world! As the disciple remarks about their greatness, Jesus however, is unimpressed. He responds to the disciple by saying that all of these stones will be brought down and that not one will be left standing upon another! His remark would have been understood by the disciple, but for us in the 21st century, it needs to be fleshed out.

Jesus prediction is part of an ancient Hebrew genre of prophecy known as apocalyptic. Apocalyptic prophecy and imagery is used in the book of Daniel, in Isaiah, in Jeremiah and in many of the other prophets and in its most understandable terms it is understood as prophecy that is "already but not yet!" In the 21st century we tend to think of apocalyptic in terms of movies where there are massive explosions and bombs destroying everything in sight. The destruction would leave nothing behind and would usher in an opportunity for new beginnings. In Jesus day, however, the understanding is much different.

There is considerable unrest in Jesus day. For the first time in the history of the Jewish people, they are ruled by an occupying force. The Romans are in control of the country and their ways and traditions are an accepted part of the landscape. There are temples to foreign gods on many street corners and there are even altars to other gods desecrating the temple mount itself! All of this is an abomination! The chief priests and the scribes are trying to hold on to the religious power they have. As a result, they go along to get along with the Romans. It is for this reason that Jesus told us last week in chapter 12 that we should be aware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes and be seen in all the right places. Those who are consumed by power will do anything they can, including devouring the homes of the poor and the powerless to get what they want!

Historically, we know that the beautiful buildings of Herod's day were all brought down. The temple was destroyed and a people were placed in domination and servitude. Jesus however was talking about more. In Mark's gospel, the disciples are portrayed as frequently clueless to Jesus ministry and his purposes. They do not understand the true nature of Messiah. They want a powerful ruler to remove the oppression of foreign control. Their understanding of great buildings and large stones is a continuation of their understanding that the rich and powerful are that way because they have received a special blessing from God! They are entitled because God has given them privilege. The disciples want someone who can give them that kind of power! When Jesus says the stones will be brought down, they believe this destruction will be the revelation of God's Kingdom come!

Jesus wants to reveal more! God's Kingdom will not come with destruction, but with construction. The "already but not yet," nature of his prophecy lies in what they have witnessed in their time in ministry with him. He has not condemned or torn down those who are oppressed or even those who are obtuse! Instead he has built them up. The tearing down Jesus is speaking of is a tearing down of the human

structures of bitterness and hatred that lead one group of people, the great and the powerful to “Lord it over,” those who have less! All of this will come down as the Kingdom of God is revealed.

Later, as the disciples are sitting with Jesus on the Mount of Olives, they press him further, still further revealing their lack of understanding. Peter, James, John and Andrew want to know when these things will take place. They want to know what sign they will see to know these things are being accomplished! Jesus does not answer their question. Instead he says, “beware of those who will lead you astray.”

Peter, James, John, and Andrew live in fear of those who would take away their freedoms. They remember the freedom of Cain and of Hannah, and of Ruth to choose their own destiny in a way that was given them by God Himself. They want to experience the same kind of freedom without tyranny. We live today in a world not so very different from theirs. Here in the United States, where freedom is held so dear and precious, we are being led to the brink of a cliff by factions which do not seem to be working in the best interest of any of us! We have no control and we are frustrated as we wait and watch and wonder. We see other nations on the brink of financial insolvency and we wonder if we are headed for the same fate. We want to know when or if God will step in and deliver us from the impending evil that seems to permeate our society!

In the midst of all our turmoil and all our trial, we think of the disciples who were equally frustrated and equally frightened. In the midst of our thoughts we hear the words of Jesus. “Do not be led astray.” He says that there will be wars and rumors of wars, nations rising against nations and kingdoms against kingdoms. There will be famine and earthquakes but these are only the beginning! This is not the end.

What we have failed to realize in all of this bitterness and betrayal is that God has already broken in to the world to begin the healing process. He has crafted a genetic line through Rahab the prostitute from Jericho, through Ruth the Moabite who migrates through the most unlikely circumstances to Bethlehem, through Boaz and Obed, and Jesse to David all the way to the one who breaks in to our world already to accomplish the not yet!

We have failed to realize that God has created a tradition of faithful men and women beginning with Samuel, the son of a woman thought to be barren, and as we will see in the weeks to come, continued through John the Baptist also conceived from a woman thought to be barren. God uses a fragile network of carefully constructed consequences that might seem as coincidence but are in reality the continual involvement of a creator who will never leave or forsake or abandon us! Our responsibility in all of this is to remember that God is not limited to the earthly constraints of time and space.

God can and will break in at various places to accomplish God’s purposes. In the fullness of time God sent his son. Some were looking, others were not. Those who did look perceived the fulfillment of God’s promises now in that moment and in the future of the created world. Those who believe their

faithful message continue to anticipate God's breaking into this reality to provide a solution to the situations and circumstances of our day and time. In the meantime, our responsibility is to wait, to watch, and to wonder.

Jesus does not give the day and the time requested by his disciples. He tells them later in the chapter that it is not for us to know. In not knowing, we are forced to trust. Rahab trusted as she waited in the fall of Jericho. Ruth trusted as she followed Naomi saying where ever you go, I will go! She did not need a guarantee! She had a covenant. It was a covenant of love made with one whom she really didn't know that well, but she lived into the covenant!

Jesus says, "Do not be led astray." He means do not let others lead you from the covenant God has made with you! Be faithful to him! Trust him! Obey him! In all things he will be faithful to you. How will we be led back from the fiscal cliff? I do not know! How will we be led toward reconciliation in our nation after a bitter election? I do not know! How will we overcome the gap between the wealthy and the poor in our nation? I do not know! But God does, and as for me and my house, we will follow the Lord!

God will provide the solutions to all our issues. How can I say that with such confidence? Because God has provided the solution to various situations and circumstances throughout history! We do not need more assurance than that! What we need is trust! What we need is the love of one another as we walk together into a future that God has already prepared and has not yet revealed! Jesus reminds us of this need this morning. We will not be led astray if we follow His teachings. We will not be led astray if we obey his commands! All that is going on in our world today is just the beginning! We can face this beginning and all others if we will stand faithfully on all God has taught us!

Our example does not have to be in the big issues of our day! We can look for God's involvement even in the seemingly simplest of situations. Have you remembered the old man with his head buried in his hands during the course of our conversation today? Let me take you back to him! He sits there quietly with a tear rolling down his cheek. He sits there in a house that belongs to his son and daughter-in-law! He is old and feeble and can no longer live alone! They have decided to take him in.

When he first came to live with them, he was welcome at their table. He was able to engage in conversation and was able to feed himself. As his health worsened, he became more clumsy. The son expressed his concern to the daughter-in-law saying "he is ruining our beautiful home!" She agreed and they thought about what they might do. Over time, he broke glasses spilled beverages and food, and dribbled his food down his chin.

Finally, the couple decided they were not willing to have him ruin their beautiful and meticulously cared for dining room. They put an old wooden table in the corner. Since he continually broke glassware, they gave him an old wooden bowl.

Every meal time, he was ushered in to the dining room to eat and there he was relegated to the corner. He sat with his head in his hands tears rolling down his cheek because he was now a stranger in his own home. He was excluded from the conversation, from the comings and goings, from the very lives of a family he had grown to love!

One evening, after dinner and as the table was being cleared, the young boy who was his grandson was working with wooden building blocks and logs. He seemed frustrated by his inability to create what he wanted. When his father noticed the frustration he asked him what he was trying to build. The little boy looked over at the wooden bowl sitting in the middle of the old worn out table and answered his father; "I am building utensils for you and mom for when you get old!"

God breaks in to our already in very strange ways to reveal our not yet! Those who are willing to look will see. Those who do not will be doomed to make the same mistakes as others who have gone before them. God's message this week is larger than life! It is more important than life! It is a message of eternity. It is a message of love! It is not important when Jesus will return. If we live our lives loving one another we will not be led astray! If we live our lives loving one another we will be prepared! This week as we celebrate Thanksgiving, let us be thankful for all who are in our lives! Our love is "Larger than Life!" Amen!

Next Week: Scripture: John 18: 33-37. Message: *For King and Country*. This week we recognize the rule of Christ the King! Even this statement is one of the most controversial in the church calendar. For the past several weeks we have been pointing to the differences between Jesus and rulers of this world. What do we mean by "Christ the King?" How are we subject to this king? Come and Worship! Come and See!