

Text: Mark 13: 1-8
Title: After the Rubble
Date: 11.15.09
Roger Allen Nelson

Sometimes I think we should have screens in here.
Pause for nervous uncomfortable laughter.

Sometimes I think we should have screens in here ~ two big beautiful flat screens on the two tall brick walls, or maybe just one giant retractable screen that would descend from on high...
right here....
just behind the pulpit...
from out of that great open silent space....

Sometimes I think we should have screens in here, not for the purpose of posting lyrics or preaching power points, but for the Assurance of Forgiveness. Rather than reading along, with our heads buried in liturgy and our shoulders rolled forward, we would receive that “grace upon grace” with our heads up and our hearts open.

Sometimes I think we should have screens in here so that we could see maps and pictures to help us get anchored in the text. Like this morning....

Jesus is leaving the temple in Jerusalem when one of the disciples announces his amazement at the beauty of the buildings and the size of the stones. There is a “golly-gee-willickers” quality to the moment. The disciples are country bumpkins come to the bright lights big city. They are fishers and farmers from the Galilean hills come to crowded, congested, and chaotic Jerusalem. They are wide eyed and overwhelmed ~ and for good reason.

Here a little history ~ and here a screen would help:

In the center of Jerusalem on the top of Mount Moriah there is an outcropping of rock upon which Abraham was called by God to sacrifice Isaac. King David built an altar on or near that rock and his ambition to erect a temple there was fulfilled by his son. King Solomon built and dedicated the First Temple in 960 BC.

Well, that first temple was later destroyed when Nebuchadnezzar ransacked Jerusalem and exiled the Jews to Babylon. The Ark of the Covenant, enshrined in that First Temple, was also destroyed. Or, it disappeared then only to be discovered later by Indiana Jones....

With the destruction of the temple the Jews were a scattered people without a land, without a religious-cultural center, without a home.

About 500 years after the destruction of the First Temple, just before Jesus was born, Herod the Great, appointed by Rome to rule the region, built (rebuilt, remodeled) the Second Temple....

On the same site, but better than double in size, and maybe as a way to placate the Jews, Herod built a massive and magnificent temple complex. And, although historians record

the measurement of bigger temple stones, archeologists have uncovered limestone blocks that measure 12 meters by 3 meters by 4 meters ~ each weighing 400 hundred tons. In the last few years in east Jerusalem a quarry was uncovered from which those blocks were hewn.

With a limestone block foundation, marble floors and walls, and gold leaf highlights, the first century historian Josephus described the temple this way:

(it).....reflected so fierce a blaze of fire that those who tried to look at it were forced to turn away.... It seemed in the distance like a mountain covered in snow, for any part not covered in gold was dazzling white.

In our text this morning, Jesus and his disciples are walking away from that Second Temple. They were a displaced and dispersed people, they were under the thumb of the empire, they were strangers in their own land, they were rubber necking and awe struck. And, Jesus responds:

Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.

A few days after 9-11, Nancy Gibbs, of Time Magazine, wrote: "If you want to humble an empire you attack its cathedrals." And, even though the Second Temple was built by Herod, the temple was still a cathedral for the Hebrew people.

It gave shape to their hopes,
it gave them a place to gather,
it connected them to their formative history,
it was their apparatus for sacrifice and supplication before God,
it gave them identity,
it gave some physical expression to the covenant,
it was their focal point for the Kingdom of God.

And therefore, to suggest that it was coming down left the disciples not just awe-struck ~ but dumb-struck. They couldn't believe that was what Jesus meant. They couldn't imagine that the Temple would be destroyed. They had signed on to see the Roman Empire overthrown not to see the Temple taken down. So later, on the Mount Olives ~ a gentle slope looking across a valley at the Temple ~ they ask Jesus what he meant and Jesus launches into a little apocalypse. Jesus gives them a picture of the end of history.

One little aside:

Jesus was right. During my recent trip to Israel I saw what is left of the Second Temple. In 70 AD the Roman Empire put down a Jewish revolt and after a long and brutal siege of Jerusalem they destroyed the Temple. The only stones left upon stones are part of the Western Wall. All that is left of the Temple is a fragment of the foundation wall. And a top the temple mount now stands the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque ~ the third holiest site in Islam.

Well, what are we to make of all of this?

What are we to make of the warning of Jesus to,

“Watch out... the end is still to come... these are the beginning of birth pains.”

What if we come at it this way?

Wilco ~ that scruffy, ragged glory, alt-country, Chicago based, rock band ~ has a song on their latest CD that includes these lyrics:

*Come on children, you're acting like children
Every generation thinks it's the end of the world
And all ya fat followers, get fit fast
Every generation thinks it's the last; thinks it's the end of the world*

*Yes, dream down a well, there's a lone heavy hell
I don't care anymore, I don't care anymore
It's a feeling we transcend, we're here at the end
I don't care anymore, I don't care anymore
You never know...*

There is more; you get the idea. They are toying with ideas about the end of the world. The cathedrals are falling, the temple is nothing but rubble, but every generation thinks that the end is nigh. They are playing with fears that global warming, or the Obama administration, or the health care bill, or the national debt, or the Bush legacy, or the repositioning of “In God We Trust” on our coins, or whatever else sends shivers down your spine, all signal our impending demise.

Some see a cosmic playbook spelling out the signs of the time.

Some see us careening chaotically through the cosmos like an un-tethered balloon.

Some see gradual progress as the human spirit learns interdependence and we develop technologies and ways of being that insure justice and peace for all.

Wilco sings “I don’t care anymore.... You never know.”

You?

Dear friends, each gospel includes some sort of last speech by Jesus. And, the thrust of each last will and testament is different depending on the gospel. For John the central point is to be united in love with Christ, for Matthew and Luke the final order is to be engaged in mission to the Gentiles, and Mark’s essential emphasis is to watch for the coming of the Son of Man. To watch for the end. There is an apocalyptic end of the world quality. There is a sense of longing that Christ is gone ~ but he is coming again.

The essential gospel hope ~ the essence of the eschaton ~ is that history has purpose and direction and that it will end in the glory of God’s *shalom*. There is more of that in scripture than anything about souls going to heaven. There is no suggestion that we just keep getting better

until we rollover one glorious morning. There may be hell to pay. The language ~ even here on the lips of Jesus~ is that everything will come unhinged.

But! But, the temple will no longer be the focal point for the kingdom of God. The coming, and second coming, of Jesus is the locus of our hope for the full realization of the kingdom of God.

The stars will begin to fall,
the trumpet will sound,
the temple will be rubble ~
but God in Christ will be with his people and wipe the very last tear from their eyes.

Now, I don't know if that is just a naïve, country bumpkin, golly-gee-willikers hope. When you are standing at the base of the Western Wall surrounded by Orthodox Jews reading the Torah, praying, celebrating bar mitzvahs, and the giant stones are rubbed smooth by years of hands and tears. And, just above you row after row of Muslims are bowed in prayer around the Dome of the Rock, and the tomb of the resurrection is but a few blocks away.....

It can seem as congested and confusing and chaotic as it did to those disciples as they walked away from the temple. And it can make you want to run and hide, or deny that you know Jesus, or wonder if you ever did.

But! But, the essential hope of the gospel is that history has direction and purpose. And as that is true. As the Lord is coming back to fully birth the *shalom* of God.

Then even this present moment is radically altered ~ it is headed toward glory.

Then every terror and trouble is not the last word.

Then empires may rise and fall, civilizations may collide and collapse, every generation may think it's the last, trials and temptations will come, and temples will tumble, but out of the rubble will stand the God of all hopefulness. And there is nothing to fear.

Watch, wait, bear witness...

in Christ a new creation is being born.

Even so, come Lord Jesus.

Amen.