

Proper 28, Year B: Mark 13:1-8
Good Shepherd on the Hill
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“As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!’ Then Jesus asked him, ‘Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.’” — Mark 13:1-2

Do you ever wonder how the world is going to end? Do you ever wonder when? Do you ever look at society or the government or the environment and wonder just how long it can all keep going? Right now, California’s burning—in the off season. Small town coastal Texas is still recovering from Harvey’s landfall last year—not to mention poor Puerto Rico and Hurricane Maria. The local weather can’t make up its mind if it wants to be hot or cold or wet or dry. The recent midterm elections were supposed to be a blue wave but instead...turned into a red tide?...or was that a rainbow ripple? When even our best prognosticators can’t figure out what’s happening, how can any of us normal people hope to read the signs of the times?

When the world is going crazy, it’s nice to have something solid to stand on, something you can grab in your hands or touch with your fingers and know, “this is real.” Something to look at and trust that everything will be okay. Maybe that’s what was going on with the disciples in our Gospel passage today. Jesus has made

his final trip to Jerusalem. The Passion is right around the corner—starting in the next chapter, actually. A lot of people in the city seem to love Jesus, but a whole lot of other people, powerful people, are really starting to hate him. In the midst of this emotional whirlwind, one disciple pipes up about how excited he is to see the Temple. Is he spilling over with awe (because records of the Temple do sound awe-inspiring: an uninterrupted mountain of clean, white marble capped in polished, shimmering gold), or is he trying to settle jumpy nerves, to bring a sense of calm with something he, like any of us, would assume is really and truly lasting? “So this whole Jerusalem thing has been a mixed bag, guys,” he says. “But, hey! Look how big! Look how fancy! I bet this place will last *forever!*”

Jesus glances around and replies, “Meh, it’s all going to get torn down someday.”

Sometimes Jesus seems like a jerk. Sometimes he can be a real bummer.

But is Jesus just being a bummer here? Is he just being a jerk?

Maybe we *need* a good letdown sometimes. Things have been, as our disciple just said, a mixed bag—both then and now. We’ve experienced the triumphal entry, but we’ve also had the cleansing of the Temple, which wasn’t Christ’s most popular action. The common people are hearing Jesus gladly, but the rulers are conspiring to arrest and kill him. Maybe, to move forward, the disciples need a smack of reality. Maybe, from time to time, we all need that same smack.

When things are going well, we like to assume they'll keep going that way. We make plans, settle in, and suppose everything will happen according to schedule. We erect buildings that are meant to last forever. We trim them with gold and set them with beautiful stained glass windows built on hope and stability. When things grow chaotic, we look back fondly on prior stability and stubbornly cling to whatever hope we can find. We hurry to our edifices, rushing toward whatever columns we can and grasping for whatever splashes of color flood through those old windows—anything to remind us of when things were good. If we can't make it back to our buildings, we'll try to take control and dig whatever hope and stability we can out of the ground beneath our feet.

Hope and stability are nice. I *like* hope and stability. I want things to go well and to keep going well—forever, if possible. But I can't cling to that. I need to be ready to let go. Because eventually, all buildings get old. Eventually the stained glass settles and cracks. Eventually, someone is bound to throw a rock through the window.

Sometimes hope and stability become gods. We end up seeking them instead of the one true God. Or, possibly worse, we seek God only as a means to find those other gods—the flimsy ones we really want to praise and worship.

Maybe that's where Jesus is pointing. He, like the disciples, sees the giant stones and the great buildings. He sees the gold and the colors and the beauty. But

he knows they're just things and just places. They look stabile, but they're really passing. They inspire hope, but it's misplaced. Really, they're just a patchwork of lead and brightly-hued glass. And they've begun to interfere with the disciples' view of reality. So he picks up a stone—not even a very big one—and throws it straight through their illusion.

“Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!’ Then Jesus asked him, ‘Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.’”

What large stones are you trusting for stability? In what great buildings are you hoping for the future? We all have our edifices. We all have our gold trim and stained glass windows. But we need to be willing to those things go. Are your hopes interfering with your view of God? Are you seeking God only as a means to stability? Today Jesus is calling us to remember that the obviously good, the apparently permanent, may not be all they're cracked up to be. We need to be ready to let go of the good and look toward the truly real. As Christians, our hope is in God, not in the world around us. Our hope is in God, not in the good gifts God sometimes—even often—gives us. Our hope is in God, not in relief from whatever our present trouble is. Our hope is “in God, the Father, the almighty, creator of heaven and earth.”

Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, upon whom the whole world places its hope: show us today the high places of our hearts, the stones and the temples that need to be torn down; free us from our illusions of stability, and bring us to trust only in you, that in the end we may find true rest in your everlasting kingdom; where Christ lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.