

When It All Comes Tumbling Down
Mark 13:1-8

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As the disciples looked around at the temple one of them remarked in awe, *“What large stones and what large buildings!”*

Thank you Herod!

Those are words we don’t normally hear! Herod is that tyrant that murdered the innocents after Jesus was born; a vicious paranoid despot who saw everyone as a threat to his throne, to the point that he had several of his sons executed because he saw them as a threat to his power. It was said that it was safer to be Herod’s pig than Herod’s son!

That is the image that we often have of him.

But if we are going to be honest we also have to acknowledge that he was also known as one who would Build Back Better! He rebuilt his nation—with theaters, royal palaces, numerous fortresses, entire cities even! The best known was Caesaria Martima, a tribute to Caesar, which even had a harbor!

Very impressive! But the most famous of his architectural projects was the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. It was begun about 20 BCE and wasn’t fully completed until about 62—over 80 years! One thousand priests were trained as stone masons and carpenters to do the work on the most holy portions of the temple.

And it was magnificent! Much of what we know about the temple comes from the Jewish historian Josephus. He records that Herod had the old structure removed and a new one built on the site. It was 100 cubits long and 100 cubits high! (In case you aren’t up to date on ancient measurements, that would be a little over 45m or 50 yards!) Some of the stones weighed over 300 tons!

Not only was there the holy of holies where sacrifices on behalf of the people were offered, where only the priest went in once a year, but there were courtyards and storerooms, magnificent arches and colonnaded porticos. Recent excavations have revealed that it took up over 35 acres.

Undoubtably it was the most elaborate of all the temples that stood on its site. But it was also had the shortest life.¹

In 66, only a few years after the temple was completed, a rebellion broke out in Palestine. Jewish zealots successfully drove the Romans out of Jerusalem and the rebellion spread to the surrounding region. No rebellions set well with Rome, and so the emperor sent troops to regain order. By 69 the surrounding countryside was back under Roman control and their sight was set on Jerusalem.

¹ Joel F. Drinkard, Jr. “Temple,” *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*. (Mercer University Press:Macon, GA. 1990) 880.

By Passover in 70 the city was surrounded. The troops allowed pilgrims to enter, but no one to leave, adding to the burden on food supplies. By August 70 the Romans had breached the final defenses and massacred much of the remaining population. The temple was destroyed, burned to the ground. The troops carried much back to Rome, where even today you can see reminders in the Arch of Titus. Josephus suggests that over a million people died during the siege.

How do we live when everything we have known, everything in which we have placed our trust, the very foundations of our lives have been destroyed?

How do we live when the stones, the beautiful stones of our lives come tumbling down?

How do we live when the very landmarks of our life are no more?

In the weeks after 9/11 many in New York City reported feelings of being lost, of not knowing where they were. For years they had oriented themselves by looking up and seeing the towering World Trade Towers. By seeing them, they knew where they were. But now?

Most scholars believe this was the world in which Mark's gospel was written. They were dealing with the destruction of the world they had known. The temple was no more. Jerusalem was no more. They weren't sure where they were. They weren't sure who they were. They definitely didn't know how to continue living.

Into that void stepped so called prophets, proclaiming that these were the signs of the end of the world, the imminent return of Jesus to set up his reign of dominion; to loose the people from their political bondage, to set up his kingdom.

That was the comfort that so many craved. They wanted the accursed Romans gone; the ones who had destroyed the temple, but even more had decimated the very landmarks of their lives.

This has to be the sign! Right Jesus?

Mark tells this story, but not as prophecy as we know it. Prophecy, biblical prophecy is not soothsaying. It is not telling the future like reading tea leaves. No, biblical prophecy is more like reading the newspaper, seeing the truth about what is really happening. The real truth. The hard to face truth.

Mark is living in a world where everything is gone, even the future looks to be gone. In this world, like ours, there are those who want to explain it away by adding up the numbers in random books of the Bible to tell us when Jesus is coming back to put the world right—usually meaning show the world that we are right!

I don't know if this is a Canadian thing, but I grew up with this type of theology. In high school there was a book that was secretly passed around, not unlike you might pass around a copy of Beloved today, terrified that someone might see you reading it! It was a book that proved, proved that we might get to walk across the stage at graduation because Jesus was coming back! After all, there was a war in the Middle East and in Vietnam, there were earthquakes everywhere. Isn't that what Jesus said was going to happen? In our

youth choir we sang the pleading song, *"I wish we'd all been ready"*² that told the story of the last days, of how so many of our classmates had been left behind. We knew Jesus was coming back soon!

As the days counted down to the new millennium, to 2000 there were prophet preachers who were certain that at the stroke of midnight not only would computers crash but so would time.

As Savannah and I would drive home from band practice we listened to Brother Harold Camping who predicted that the [world would end on May 21, 2011](#), and, when that didn't happen, [amended the date to Oct. 21](#). Neither happened and Brother Camping was crestfallen, explaining it away as an "invisible judgment day," of the spiritual variety.

But so many had listened and believed, selling their homes, going to the desert to await the rapture. One woman even killed her children to save them from the wrath to come.

There are always those prophets who want to tell us what will happen, who know so well what God is going to do? They just overlook that little verse near the end of the chapter. *'But about that day or hour no one knows.'*³

My guess is that most of us don't spend a lot of emotional energy trying to figure out the date of the end of the world. Those aren't the stones that we fear tumbling down. That isn't the destruction that we are living through, that we are trying to make sense of.

No, we are trying to figure out how to live when the stones of our marriage have come tumbling down.

We are trying to figure out where we are when that job which had been the orientation of our identity is no longer there, or just doesn't make sense anymore.

We are trying to find a place of refuge from the pandemic that is altering the very landscape of our lives.

We are seeking a word of assurance when the report from the doctor comes back with the very words we didn't want to hear.

Kate Bowler knows about living in that world. Her world was a temple of everything wonderful. She grew up in Canada, married her high school sweetheart in her 20's, had a baby in her 30's, had her dream job at Duke Divinity School. She was an expert on the Prosperity Gospel, that theology that says if you are good then God will bless you; if anything bad happens you just need to pray. Think Joel Osteen.

But then....

Then this ache in her stomach wouldn't go away. Doctor after doctor ran test, prescribed medicines, therapy. One said *"We're at the squishy end of an already squishy diagnosis."* (Just what you want to hear from your doctor!). She finally argued, badgered, demanded another test and was sent for a CT scan.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1FcTKNXI00>

³ Mark 13:32. *NRSV*

The phone rang in her office when an assistant from the doctors office called saying, “We need you to come to the hospital right away. It is everywhere.” What is everywhere?

Cancer.

Bowler was diagnosed with Stage 4 Colon cancer. Her magnificent world came tumbling down.

Though she was surrounded by her loving family, a supportive community, she also heard from those “Prophets of Explanation,” those individuals who tried to make sense of what was happening. They weren’t looking for Jesus return as much as a return to a world of normalcy, the world gone away, a world that made sense.

In the Appendix to her wonderful book, *Everything Happens for a Reason; And Other Lies I’ve Loved*, she shares some that she heard, was told. Some things she says we should never say!

Things like:

It’s going to get better.

Everything happens for a reason...

When my aunt had cancer

God just needed an angel.

You may have heard them. You may have even said them.

And when we do, we join that chorus of false messiahs, those who pretend to know the very mind of God; who have all the answers but have never dared ask the questions. These people, as Jesus warned, will just lead us astray.

So what do we do? What do we do when the stones with which we have built our lives come tumbling down?

We wait and we trust.

We wait. Jesus said that when things happen they are just the beginning of the birth pangs. We know about waiting, about birth pangs. Our youngest daughter is expecting. We are waiting for those first pangs to announce that something is happening, but you still have to wait! And it doesn’t come painlessly. It isn’t always easy. There are times when we just need to endure—the pain, the heartache. We wait in hope that God is birthing something new!

We just have to wait. But that doesn’t mean that we have been abandoned. It doesn’t mean that we have been left alone. In those times, as we wait, we have to trust. We trust that the God whose face we see most fully in Jesus. We understand that there are times when things happen that God does not intend. God does not intend bad things happening to us, any more than God wanted the temple to be destroyed. God is always wanting the best for us, and as my theology professor Frank Tupper always reminded us, God is always doing everything that God can do. But there are times when God’s healing grace is not available, when God can’t make everything right. But in those times, especially in those times, God’s sustaining grace is most available. God will not let us go!

That is the faith that will sustain us when the stones come tumbling down. When they come down in our individual lives, when they come down globally as in this pandemic. It is not the end! God is working to redeem this creation God loves. Even us.

Thanks be to God.