

Pentecost 26B (11/18/2018)
Daniel 12:1-3
Psalm 16
Hebrews 10:11-14 [15-18] 19-25
Mark 13:1-8

What is the meaning of faith when the worst has already happened? We live in fear of the unimaginable, but the unimaginable is a reality for those who have actually endured it. When the worst-case scenario comes to pass, it's an ending, a loss. But it's also a beginning, an occasion to lean into the hope that God holds the world in grace through even the worst trauma. The promise of the gospel is that the cross gives way to an empty tomb; the promise of the gospel is that there is life beyond tragedy.

What is the world coming to?

Things just seem to be getting worse and worse.

It's a scary time to be alive.

I wonder what kind of world my grandchildren will inherit.

Have you noticed yourself entertaining thoughts like these? You're not alone.

Popular wisdom holds that the world is on a collision course with disaster, and we are too small to do much of anything about it. In his “little apocalypse” in our Gospel from Mark today, Jesus puts his finger on the kinds of crises that cause us to worry about the future: “Many will come in my name... and they will lead many astray. ...Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; [and] there will be earthquakes ...there will be famines.” Frauds who stake their legitimacy on Jesus yet who deceive the masses, political turmoil and violence, natural disasters, humanitarian emergencies – Jesus might as well be describing current affairs.

The prime symbol of his apocalyptic prophecy stands right before the disciples' eyes. “Teacher, what large stones,” one of them exclaims at the sight of the Jerusalem temple, “what wonderful buildings.” And Jesus replies, “Do you see these great

buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." Wars, disasters, widespread suffering – all these catastrophes are summed up in the image of the temple, seemingly too big to fail, destroyed. *It's all going down.*

The disciples are understandably concerned. "When will this be," they plead with Jesus to tell them, "and what will be the sign...?" *If we know what to look for*, in other words, *then we can retain at least a semblance of control in the midst of chaos*. But the signs of chaos that Jesus names are not specific to any given era. **The rise of phony leaders? Wars? Earthquakes? Famines? These are regrettably common occurrences throughout the ages, and each occurrence is devastating in its own right. So, even as Jesus refuses to provide a blueprint for predicting the end of time, he also acknowledges the tragedy and suffering that the world is certain to experience in the meantime.**

Apocalyptic prophecies reflect our deepest apprehensions. The worst-case scenario lurks just beneath the surface of our daily thoughts: *What if an active shooter entered this public place? What if my home and the homes of my neighbors all burned to the ground? What if the principles upholding our democracy were permanently eroded?* Questions like these speak to the power of anxious speculation to impact our outlook and behavior. We may try to reassure ourselves with the notion that the worst-case scenario is unlikely to play out, but the question remains in the back of our minds: *What if it actually happened?*

For Mark's first audience, it actually had. The Gospel of Mark was written at the time of the Jewish-Roman War of 66-70 CE, three to four decades after Jesus' death. The war was a terrible event. Rome's response to the Judean revolt was ruthless, and the

reconquest of Jerusalem involved the brutal subjugation of its people. The first-century historian Josephus describes one phase of the siege in which the Roman general Titus ordered his soldiers to capture poor people who were attempting to flee the city:

They were accordingly beaten and subjected to torture of every description... and then crucified opposite the walls. ...The soldiers out of rage and hatred amused themselves by nailing their prisoners in different postures; and so great was their number that space could not be found for the crosses nor crosses for the bodies (*War* 5.449-51).¹

The crowning achievement of the Roman siege of Jerusalem was the total destruction of the temple, the same structure that Jesus' disciples had admired years before. Not one stone was left upon another, except for what little remains of the Western Wall. The chief symbol of God's presence with the people was thrown down, never to be rebuilt.

So, in Mark's time, Jesus' prophecy of the temple's ruin was no oracle of fearful things to come, but a description of a tragedy that had already occurred. The destruction of the temple, together with all the horror of Roman repression, was a deep and lasting national trauma. For Mark's first audience, then, the question that our Gospel story asks is not *When will this be?* but *What is the meaning of faith when the worst has already happened?*

We live in fear of the unimaginable, but the unimaginable is a reality for those who have actually endured it. Think of the early martyrs, persecuted for their faith and sentenced to a violent death in full view of thousands of Roman spectators. Think of the twelve generations of enslaved Africans, trying to make sense of the Christian confession through 250 years of organized oppression in the American colonies and

¹ Cited by Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 29.

states. Think of the millions of prisoners in Nazi death camps, torn from their homes and families, and awaiting mass execution in service of Hitler's Final Solution.

Or in the case of individual tragedies, think of the person who has lost her lifelong companion, or the parents who have lost a child. Think of the patient whose options for treatment have run out. Think of the person whose abandonment or illness or job loss or eviction lands them on the street in the cold of winter.

When the worst-case scenario comes to pass, it's an ending, a loss. It may in fact appear to be *the end* – an incredible, even insurmountable, obstacle to hope.

But Jesus resists despair. "Do not be alarmed," he encourages us, "this must take place, but the end is still to come... This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." Dear church, **Jesus never says that there's no *reason* to be alarmed, but only that our crises, our afflictions, our losses do not have the final word. When the worst-case scenario comes to pass, it's an ending, but it's also a beginning,² an occasion to lean into the hope that God holds the world in grace through even the worst trauma. The promise of the gospel is that the cross gives way to an empty tomb; the promise of the gospel is that there life beyond tragedy.³**

² Emilie M. Townes, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 4, 312.

³ Reinhold Niebuhr.