

Tearing Down the Temples

I have a strong suspicion that very few of you came to church today with apocalyptic expectations. It is one of the oddities of the liturgical year that, in order to prepare the congregation for the coming of Advent, our season of anticipation of our coming Christ, the lessons of the day walk us through some rather odd terrain.

Most modern Christians don't know what to make of texts that speak to us of cosmic repercussions and grand battles between good and evil. It seems that the veil slips, not so much between life today and life then, or even between this world and the next, but between this world and the Marvel Universe.

Everything is suddenly larger than life. We are no longer speaking of the greatest commandment, or even the widow and her two coins; suddenly we have slipped headlong into a world that is marked by wars and rumors of wars, of nations rising up against nations, kingdoms against kingdoms.

It's vivid enough to expect super-heroes to start showing up for the fight.

It's always struck me more than a little odd, bordering on the perverse, that just as we immerse ourselves into the general bonhomie of the holiday season, the scriptures that accompany us are hardly "feel good" scriptures.

Turkey and apocalypse don't really go that well together, and yet here we are. Year after year, we roll around to this time, and regularly we read passages like this.

And it couldn't have been a "feel good lesson" for the disciples either.

I know that I was not alone this past week in recollections of the images of war. Early in the week, I visited the website of the Poetry Foundation, as I like to do. It's a wonderful website; they can always be counted upon to have a poem that is current in its content. Unsurprisingly, they had a compilation of three poems of the Great War, as it was known before a second war came along that seemingly stripped us of the notion that wars could be ended. The poems they selected were *The Owl*, *Dulce Et Decorum Est*, and *In Flanders' Fields*.¹

In a startling tableau created in conjunction with Manual Cinemas, the poems were read against a backdrop of imagery.

The imagery was stark, unsurprisingly so. It was imagery that wouldn't out of place with the lesson from Mark today.

¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/video/148314/three-world-war-i-poems-commemorating-the-centenary-of-the-armistice>

We all prefer the imagery of the Allies' triumphant entry into Paris, don't we?

The disciples would have also.

"Look, teacher, what large stones and what large buildings?"

A bunch of fishermen called away from their nets, the most cosmopolitan one of them having been a regional tax collector, the disciples could be excused for being a little bit googly-eyed over the big city.

I remember well the first time I flew into the city of New York from my small southern city... the plane banked over Manhattan and suddenly I saw a skyline that wasn't so much a skyline as wave upon wave of skylines - I had no idea a city could be so large.

Do you remember the first time you walked into a building that took your breath away?

The disciples have come from the countryside into the city... it reminds me of the song, "How Are You Gonna Keep Them Down on the Farm (When They've Seen Paree).

They could be excused for being a bit star-struck.

And not only are they star-struck over the size of the buildings, as a group of good Jewish men, they had come to the center of their faith.

Protestants don't really have a single church that represents the center of the Universe to us. There are, of course, congregations whose contributions occupy an outsized role in their respective denominations. For Lutherans, the Castle Church of Wittenberg is perhaps such a place. For Presbyterians we may feel that way about Saint Pierre's in Geneva and Saint Giles in Edinburgh...for Catholics, Saint Peter's in Rome - these can be places of pilgrimage for a great many people. Given the history of this congregation, I have on a number of occasions found tourists out in front of this wonderful building taking pictures. I always invite them in to see the inside. We love this building. But we don't think that God is uniquely present in this space more so that in, say, another house of worship down the road.

But for the Jews of the first Century, the temple was more than just a building.

It was God's footstool on earth.

All of the deeply important moments of faith took place in the temple. To go to the temple was a part of the most significant milestones of one's life.

The temple was commanded by God to be built. The temple was preserved by God. The temple was the place where the holy of holies existed as the location in the cosmos where God would touch humankind.

So, they are more than star-struck. It is a deeply spiritual experience.

These are not the murmurings of a country cousin come to town. These are the sighs of the deeply religious at the dwelling place of God.

It is to *this* that Jesus says, “Not one stone will be left upon another.”

That’s sort of the opposite of saying, “Yes, aren’t they beautiful.”

What’s going on here?

To understand, we need to look back about a half of a chapter to a cryptic interaction with a fig tree. Jesus walks up on a tree, it’s in leaf, he expects it to be full of fruit. It isn’t. Jesus curses it, and the next day when the disciples and Jesus walk by, they note that the tree is dried up to a husk down to its withered roots.

It seems like a fit of pique. The disciples are suitably mystified. Jesus says something about prayer and moving mountains... if anything the exchange leaves one wondering what is going on at a fairly deep level – surely Jesus doesn’t wander around aimlessly cursing trees and leaving their derelict remains like toothpicks on the landscape for no apparent reason.

And then there are more verbal pas de deuxes between Jesus and the Pharisees, more scrapes between Jesus and the Scribes... on and on they go, back and forth. Until finally, they come to the city, and there Jesus finds people hungry for authentic expressions of faith in God, and what they are getting is ritual instead. New Testament scholar Brian Blount writes, “It [the temple] was to act as a center for the kind of teaching of God’s will that demonstrated how God expected the people to live before God and live with each other. The literal ground of their being was also supposed to be the symbolic guide for their living, so that the people could know God’s intent for the structure of their communal living as well as Herod’s architects knew the infrastructure of this building. Clearly, though, Mark believes that something had gone wrong.”²

To anyone who has been reading Mark’s Gospel, this should come as no surprise. The back and forth between Jesus and the temple community has been deteriorating even as Jesus approaches the holy city. Something *has* gone very, very wrong. Brian continues,

“When Jesus enters Jerusalem and walks up for a reconnoiter of the Temple, he apparently leaves with a sense of dismay rather than joy. Mark narrates that display by an appeal to the only tradition of Jesus cursing something anywhere in the Gospel record. The fig tree that he saw on the way to the temple also conveyed by its grand, leafy appearance that it could fill the hunger of a person in need. Just as people hungry for direction from God were flocking now toward the Temple, so Jesus, seeing this tree at a distance drew near to seek its sustenance. Both Jesus and the people had been fooled by appearances. Neither the tree nor the temple were able to make good on their ostentatious displays.”³

So, the fig tree is cursed, and Jesus declares that the temple will be torn down.

² Brian K. Blount and Gary W. Charles, Preaching Mark in Two Voices. (Louisville, W/JKP, 2002) p205

³ Ibid. p206

If we are looking for a feel-good passage for our feel-good time of year, we've come to the wrong place.

But that doesn't mean that I see no hope in this passage. And the hope comes from perhaps the strangest place, from the very apocalyptic words that punctuate Jesus's cryptic remarks.

In Biblical Studies, Apocalyptic is a noun. It refers to a variety of literature that we encounter in the Bible. Almost the entirety of *Revelation* is Apocalyptic, so are portions of Daniel, and each of the synoptic Gospels contain places where Jesus seems to break out from regular speech into sweeping narratives that picture a great cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil.

Apocalyptic isn't code language – and by that, I mean it can't be decoded. There are no equivalencies between particular images and particular realities. Admittedly, plenty of folks have tried to draw those straight lines, but that is just not responsible Biblical scholarship. The original audience would have known the difference between apocalyptic speech and regular speech, and if they could keep it straight, we should too.

Here's how you understand apocalyptic: it's evocative. The images are supposed to evoke in us a sense that there is something greater going on than what we can see. The language is supposed to remind us that, while we think we understand what we see, there is always a reality beyond the present situation. More than anything, they speak in poetic ways of how God will always triumph over evil.

Mark's audience would come to need that message in ways that the author could never have known or intended. While the temple itself lasted well past Jesus's own crucifixion and resurrection, Mark's audience would have lived to see its destruction. Between the years 66 and 70, when Mark's Gospel was likely written, the holy city was besieged, and then occupied. The Jews of Jerusalem would have lived to see Roman soldiers sacking the treasury and desecrating the temple, sacrificing pigs on the altar.

To say that they needed hope is an understatement of the first magnitude.

And hope is *exactly* what the Gospel offers.

We preach the hope of the resurrection.

We preach the hope of redemption.

We preach the hope of forgiveness.

And here's the thing: those are not negotiable hopes!

A thing is either resurrected, or it is not.

A thing is either redeemable, or it is not.

A thing is either forgiven, or it is not.

They are not negotiable hopes – because they are God’s doing. They are God’s gift to humankind.

There is no amount of casuistry allowed when contemplating these things.

And so to Jesus, coming as he was to the Temple, seeing as he did the conscription of the sacred for personal gain and vainglory, knowing the cost of discipleship, there could be no compromise.

There are things about which we cannot compromise. Not if we wish to be the followers of Jesus Christ. Any temple that stands as an obstacle to the grace of God must be torn down.

This past week, I read an article that was shared with me by a member of the congregation. It was from a journal that I don’t normally read. It was an op-ed piece that represents the type of public theology that, frankly, we need to see more of. The author juxtaposed two public figures, each beloved by their base. And each expressed reasons that they could not forgive the other.

We all know nursing a grudge is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die, but there they were, out in the public sphere, declaring their undying inability to forgive.

It ought not be so. And the author said so.

Far be it from me to reduce the faith of the Gospel to mere behaviorism, but if the behavior is what stands between us and the grace of God, it’s a temple that needs to be torn down.

And of course, we could say a word or two about attitudes... we seem to be stuck, as a nation, in a pattern of recriminations and starkly divergent views on the fundamental course of our country. And of course, my calling as a preacher of the Gospel and yours as a hearer of Gospel is not to succumb to the worst of our impulses to call names and see the worst in those who do not share our ideological biases but to raise the caliber of discussion. I’ll let other faiths speak for themselves, but for the Christians of the world, we should at least be able to be expected to seek and see the best in humankind. Any attitude that keeps us from seeing the imprint of God on each other is at temple that needs to be torn down.

We could be at this all day, so let me boil it down to this: What we are really talking about are *idols*. If it stands between you and the grace of God, it’s a temple that needs to be torn down.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.