

Stones Upon Stones

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I Samuel 2:1-10; Mark 13:1-8

Apparently there's a rumor going around that the world is going to end in 2012. I heard it on tv as I was passing through an airport yesterday. It has to do with the end of a 5000-year cycle in the Maya calendar. If we think about it, it's hard to remember a time when someone wasn't predicting the end of the world, and if we read the scriptures, we see that those forecasts have been going on for a long, long time. Obviously, we're still here, so those predictions thus far have been wrong. Personally, I'm not worried enough about Dec. 21, 2012 that I'm going to hold back on buying green bananas that week.

The end of life as we know it is probably not yet at hand, but there's no question that we are living in difficult times. The new millennium has ushered in a century rife with wars and terrorism and economic collapse. As the seasonal dark and cold close in around us, it's a tough time for people living on the streets or unemployed folks who can't pay the heat bill. It's a hard time, too, for many as winter depression or old memories of loss set in.

At such a moment, in such a world, our lections prepare us for the passing of the present world and the coming of a new age of love and justice. They hold before us the question, 'In what do you place your trust?'

For the Jews, the temple in Jerusalem was the ultimate symbol of security. Herod, who was known for ambitious building projects, had spared no expense in making the temple impressive. The plaza on which it stood, atop the highest point in Jerusalem, was as large as 30 football fields. The temple complex was built of gleaming white marble. Some of the stones were as large as a modern double-decker bus, and when the sun shone on them, the temple dazzled the eye. It was the largest temple of any kind in the Roman Empire, the place where the great and the humble alike bowed before God. How could anything be more lasting and secure than that?

The disciples certainly seem to feel that way. Mark tells us that "as he came out of the temple one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!'" (Mark 13:1) "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 13:2)

Impossible! Imagine if you had been in Manhattan in the summer of 2001 where the massive twin towers of the World Trade Center dominated the city skyline, and someone had told you then that those towers would soon come crashing down. You wouldn't have believed it, and neither did the disciples believe Jesus.

We expect our institutions to last. We expect our marriages to continue until death us do part. We expect our government to be reliable and our investments to be sound. We expect to be able to go places like a medical clinic at Ft. Hood or a workplace in Orlando without violence and mayhem. Things aren't supposed to fall apart.

Certainly the disciples expected so great a building as the temple to stand as long as they lived and to endure far beyond their lifetimes. Instead, Jesus told them to expect that troubles of all kinds would be coming along. And so they have. And so they will. It seems inevitable that, as William Butler Yeats put it, "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold."

Sooner or later, it all falls apart. Herod's temple, whose massive stones were so soon cast asunder, showed the fragility of one man's desire for immortality. Even as the tangible expression of the dream of the Jewish nation, a dream that had carried them through centuries, the temple proved vulnerable.

What things or ideas or institutions are that important to you and me? What do we really depend on for security and hope and meaning? Our government, perhaps, or the church universal? Is it your home or your marriage or your family? Maybe it's the idea of a certain life focus, the way Hannah's life was built around her desire for a child.

Imagine these important things in your life as stones: a stone of wealth, a stone of influence, a stone of possessions, a stone of accomplishment, a stone of being loved. Those things that we turn to for a sense of permanence, for comfort, for peace of mind, are the stones from which we carefully construct a personal temple, our sanctuary, our shrine. When there is trouble in our lives, we seek refuge there, and when there is joy, it is the place we offer up our thanks.

So for Jesus to say, "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down" is very scary. The professional position you have worked so hard for can be taken away. The home you count on for security can be lost. The relationship you rely on can fail. Your retirement account suddenly is wiped out. The earth's atmosphere and water supply are being poisoned. People we love die and our own bodies wear out. There are wars and rumors of wars.

And all the "temples" we have so carefully constructed with these stones may turn out to offer no protection at all from the storms of life. Yet Jesus says, in the face of our fears about the destruction of the temple and the dashing down of all the stones, "Be not alarmed."

There are always going to be calamities in the world that we cannot avoid. But know that *a new age is always coming*, not only at the end of human time, but whenever we cast our lot with God's reign through faith in Jesus Christ. Things go on rising and falling and crashing and getting repaired around us, just as they always did. But following Jesus and his life-giving way of love and justice means the "end of the world" in the sense that it is the end of the way we have always known things to be. It is the end of brokenness and abandonment and desolation and the beginning of something completely new.

Diane Bergant: Though we know that "the new age dawned with Jesus' coming, it takes root in us only when we open ourselves to its power. Each time we are willing to move beyond our sinfulness, despite the 'distress' or 'tribulation' this may cause, we step over the threshold into the new age." The change that brings down the stones of the temple around our ears is beyond our control. But when we enter into a relationship with Christ, the old world passes away and a new age begins.

If you visit Jerusalem today and go to the Temple Mount, you will not see Herod's great temple there, for its stones no longer rest one upon another. Some of those bus-sized building stones remain, and one of the foundation walls. Even the memory of the ancient temple is so powerful that faithful Jews still go to that one wall to pray.

If only there *were* a building we could always count on for safety! How reassuring that would be. Jesus offers a different kind of protection from uncertainty. What he gives us instead is a valuable piece of advice: As you travel through life, stay alert. His words remind you of those signs you see on highways in the mountains: "Watch for falling rocks." He reminds us that even though stones are going to fall off the temple, and sometimes even the whole temple will collapse, we need not be afraid.

As we come to the end of the liturgical year, our perspective in worship focuses on the coming of the Lord. Soon we will relive again his first coming into the world, and we always await his coming again at the end of time. But let us know, too, that he is always coming, coming here and now, coming into our lives each time we step forward in faithful living.

Living in faith is summed up the lines of a poem:

When you walk to the edge of all the light that you know
And are about to step out into the darkness of the unknown,
Faith is knowing one of two things will happen:
There will be something to stand on,
or, you will be taught to fly.

Thanks be to God. Amen.