
World Rocked by God

Mark 13:1-8

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 18, 2012 by the Rev. Dr. Will Willimon

Last week I told a Sophomore that I was preaching in Duke Chapel and invited him to attend this service.

"No, I don't think so," he replied with that brutal candor that one often finds among the young. "They tell me that place is falling in. A stone fell out of the ceiling and nearly killed some guy."

Idiot.

"Rabbi, what stones! What a magnificent, eternal-looking church!" exclaim the disciples.

"Not a stone will be left on stone," replies Jesus. "This great building destroyed, wars and rumors of wars, nation against nation, earthquakes, famines." This is Jesus' longest sermon in Mark. He speaks to the twelve, letting the inner circle in on a somber, apocalyptic secret: this temple, appearing so eternal, shall end.

We're at the end of the church's year, frost and dry stubble along the roadside, summer green become russet, Melville's "November of the soul," and Jesus talks cataclysmic ending.

Our young, new Dean of the Chapel, makes me feel....old.

"I was your age when I came to Duke Chapel," I tell Dr. Powery. He replies, "Really?"

Contrary to what you have been led to believe, when Jesus goes apocalyptic, and talks of the end, he's not predicting the future; *he is speaking of the precariousness of the present*. This temple, this world is not as stable, eternal as it appears.

Mainline, educated, respectable, liberal Christianity gets nervous when Jesus talks apocalyptic. We prefer Jesus as a great moral teacher, example of compassion for the poor, or someone who gives us a spiritual boost. None of that here in Jesus' last will and testament.

"Jesus, before you leave, give us some final words of wisdom."

Jesus replies: God is going to kill everyone here. All this, for any of its present glory, is ending, stone ripped from stone, all reduced to rubble.

"I'm feeling kind of temporary," laments "Death of a Salesman's" Willy Loman. Must you be past fifty to know the feeling?

Shiva is not only Hinduism's beneficent creator but also disruptive destroyer: "I kill and make alive," boasts the one whom Jews and Christians worship (Deut. 22:39). Ever heard a sermon on that text?

Here at the university we enjoy thinking that civilization is making progress, that our future is more bright than Jesus predicted. Our research makes the world safer, stabilizes the future, vanquishes the grip of ignorance, and frees us to flourish -- forever.

But what if permanence is delusion, illusion? There's a reason that this place is built to look six hundred years older than it is, a reason why the pews are bolted to the floor. Feeling kind of temporary, we come to church as we come to the university -- to do something about our precariousness.

Some of you have heard me tell of my conversation with an undergraduate standing in the chapel vestry, seeming to admire the portraits of past Deans of the Chapel.

"That is Dean James Clelland," I instructed. "One of the most beloved of my predecessors."

"Odd," he replied, pointing to the brass label on the frame, "says here that it is Frank Garber."

What? It was true. Some undergrad vandal had switched the labels. Maybe for years, people were calling dead deans by wrong names!

When I left here, the President asked, "Will you be expecting us to pay for your portrait?"

"Don't bother," I replied. "If having my portrait gained me immortality, it would be worth the expense. They have the wrong names of the portraits downstairs. No, when I'm dead, I'm really dead, portrait or no portrait."

I bet that those of you who are young, know this, even though most of you expect that you are a long way from the finitude that faces me. You've learned that in education there is growth, something is gained, yes. But something is always lost. To learn anything worth knowing requires relinquishment of what you thought you knew. Some of you are experiencing college not as cheery progress, growth and development but rather as cataclysmic stone being thrown off stone, walls coming down, and what you thought you knew ripped off, destroyed, by new insight.

In a graduate history seminar at Yale, C. Vann Woodward told us, "All American history written before 1960 is not only out of date but wrong. Vietnam and the Civil Rights Movement disestablished what we once believed to be our story."

St. Paul hears God say to one of his urbane, sophisticated congregations, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and discard the intelligence of the intelligent." (1 Cor. 1:19) God not only as Alpha but also Omega.

From what I've seen as a pastor, there is no arrival of God, without some sort of departure, no grasping of faith, sans relinquishment. In every move toward God, something is gained, but something also is lost, and the loss may be painful.

That's one reason I enjoy divinity students, most of whom had to leave something of value, in order to be in the ministry. Before class I asked, "How did you get to Duke Divinity?"

She responded, "Well, God called me, made me walk off a good paying job, my husband said this wasn't part of his contract and left, and my teenaged son said he would never forgive me for making him move from his friends."

And I thought, "I'm unworthy to teach someone who has paid this high a price to be at Duke."

Some of us went to the polls and voted for the politicians who promised to "get our country back." Let me know how that works for you.

Robert Herrick was *bon vivant* in the taverns of London. Then he became a parish pastor, thus gaining a front row seat on human finitude, leading to his famous, "Gather ye rosebuds while you may. Time is flying.... The same flower that smiles today tomorrow will be dying."

Nothing about us is built to last. In the end, last Sunday of the year, Jesus' last will and testament tells the truth: precariousness, transitory, stone not left upon stone.

But do I speak too negatively of God's ending? In our gospel, Jesus concludes his apocalypse of cataclysmic destruction by saying, "This is the beginning of birth pangs" (13:8)

Sometimes, what we call death is, at the hands of God, birth. Only a living God can make the end, the beginning.

Is today's gospel good news or bad? That may be dependent on where you are when you get the apocalyptic news.

I never hear today's gospel without recalling a student mission trip to Honduras. A group of twenty of us were working a couple of weeks in the impoverished village of San Marco, running a makeshift health clinic. Each night we would build a fire and sit with villagers singing. One night a student had the bright idea that we all go around and share our favorite Bible verse (always a threat to Methodists who are not that sure about the Bible). Someone mentioned John 3:16, another "The Lord is my shepherd," and then a Honduran woman said through an interpreter that her favorite verse was from Mark 13, not one stone left on stone, earthquakes, famine and fire. She said, "That passage has always been such a comfort to me."

Comfort? Sounds like Jesus on a bad day to me.

Apocalyptic, a comfort? "I was talking with that woman," said the nurse sitting next to me. She has given birth five times and three of her children have died due to malnutrition."

When Jesus says to me -- me, well housed, well futured, reasonably safe and secure, cared for by the Duke Health Plan -- "God's going to dismantle all this. God didn't create the present order. God has no stake the preservation of your vaunted status quo," I hear this as bad news.

But a woman for whom my status quo has been hell, hears Jesus' talk of end and disruption as gospel.

Gibbon called the 410 Sack of Rome by the Visigoths “the greatest and most awful scene in the history of mankind,” blaming the whim morality of Christians for the fall of the greatest Empire. Gibbon’s British imperialism showed.

Our Dean Powery, in his fine book on Christian hope, *Dem Dry Bones*, quotes a spiritual (unforgettably sung by the Chapel Choir on Palm Sundays),

King Jesus rides a mile-white horse, No man can hinder him...

He pitched his tent on Canaan’s ground.

No man works like Him,

And broke the Roman kingdom down...

The slaves read the dissolution of empire differently than Caesar’s sycophants.

I asked one of my pastors, who works with the homeless, how she persevered in this shoestring ministry for over two decades. She waved her hand over the desolation of downtown Birmingham and explained, ‘I know a secret: all this is transient.’

Thus Jesus ends his wild, Cormac-McCarthy-apocalyptic, cataclysmic discourse by saying, “This is the beginning, this is birth.”

Here this Sunday the end or the beginning of the show? Death or birth?

I passed a billboard that read, “Need peace? Come to Jesus,” giving a church website. Jesus is the Prince of Peace and yet he has rarely been so to me. I know Jesus as divine disruption, dramatic destabilizer of life that once seemed fixed and permanent. Jesus’ apocalyptic reveals that reality may not be as rigid, as imperishable as you have been led to believe. God Omega and Alpha.

At the end, Jesus lets us in on a secret about our end: a world torn apart, the veil in the temple ripped by God so that a new world might be made available by God. The end of your marriage, your graduation, your pink slip at work, rejection letter from medical school, empty nest, death of your beloved -- by God’s grace, these endings may be birth pangs, offer of new world. It all depends on a truthful God who whose eternal love is our only hope.

A friend of mine defines the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, in two sentences: (1.) God is going to get what God wants, (2.) No matter how much God’s got to mess up what you’ve got in order to get it.

Apocalyptic promise or threat, good news or bad. All depends on where you happen to be when you get the news.