

Do Not Be Alarmed

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, November 14, 2021.

Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25
Mark 13:1-8

Those of you who were here last Sunday may remember that when we last left Jesus and his disciples, they were in the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus had been teaching in the temple and had warned his listeners about the hypocrisy and corruption of the scribes. He also took notice of the crowd putting money into the temple treasury and pointed out a poor widow who put in two copper coins, which was everything she had.

This morning we enter the story where we left off last week. Jesus and his disciples are just leaving the temple when one of his disciples begins marveling at the grandeur of the temple complex—the large stones and large buildings. We can get an idea of what this disciple was talking about by looking at the Western Wall [**Photo of Western Wall**] in the Old City of Jerusalem. The Western Wall is one of the last remaining walls of the Temple Mount, built by Herod the Great in the first century B.C. As such, it is the most significant religious site in the world for the Jewish people, [**Closeup Photo of the Western Wall**], a sacred place for Jewish prayer and pilgrimage. Looking closer you can see just how huge were the limestone blocks used to construct the wall.

At the time of Jesus' visit, around the year 30 A.D., the temple complex probably looked something like this [**Artist's Drawing of the Temple Complex**]. According to Robert A. Bryant, professor of religion at Presbyterian College in South Carolina, the Roman historian Tacitus described the temple complex as a mountain of white marble adorned with gold, a 'temple of immense wealth.' Its enormous stones mystified many, and the surrounding complex included sprawling courtyards, colonnaded courts, grand porches and balconies, covered walkways, and monumental stairs. Herod the great builder built it to impress the wealthiest and most powerful rulers of the day, and he succeeded."

So, what Jesus says in response to his disciple's oohing and aahing is staggering. "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." His disciples can hardly believe their ears. How could that possibly happen? They are dumbfounded. It's like someone in the 1990s looking up at the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City and saying, "One day these towers will fall. In less than two hours they will be reduced to rubble." Who would have believed that such a thing could ever happen?

Jesus and his disciples walk together from the Temple southeast to the Mount of Olives two kilometers away, which takes them about half an hour. There they pause a moment to rest, taking in the view of the Temple Mount. **[View of the Temple Mount from the Mount of Olives]** This present-day photo shows that view from the Mount of Olives looking over at the Temple Mount and the Old City of Jerusalem. It was there that Jesus' inner circle of disciples (Peter, James, John, and Andrew) pulled Jesus aside to speak with him privately.

Jesus had just said that the temple complex was going to be completely destroyed—obliterated! They needed to know more. "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?"

Jesus' response, known as the "Little Apocalypse," is his longest speech in Mark's gospel. We heard just the beginning of it this morning. It continues to the end of chapter 13. **[Sermon Title Slide #2]**

His response does not entirely answer their question. Jesus tells them how to recognize the beginning of the end, not the end itself. First, he warns them to beware of false messiahs or false prophets, who may claim to speak in Jesus' name but who will lead many people astray. Second, Jesus counsels them to be calm and patient when they hear of wars and rumors of wars, when they hear of earthquakes and famines taking place. "Do not be alarmed," Jesus says. These things "must take place, but the end is still to come." Finally, Jesus speaks of these events as just "the beginning of the birth pangs." Yes, these apocalyptic events will bring about pain and suffering, but like a

pregnant woman going into labor, they mark the end of a long time of waiting and anticipate the coming birth of new life. The pain and suffering don't lead to despair, but to hope, to the anticipated dawn of God's new day.

Mark's gospel was probably written about forty years after Jesus' death and resurrection, in or around the year 70 A.D., following the failure of the four-year-long First Jewish Revolt against Roman rule and the destruction of the temple. Mark was writing out of the experience of his own Christian community at a time of great social upheaval. The words he attributes to Jesus as a prediction of the destruction of the temple in some distant future would have sounded like a description of current events to Mark's contemporaries in 70 A.D. Mark was trying to give his community encouragement and hope in one of the most difficult periods in Jewish history.

We, too, could use some encouragement and hope, as we are living in one of the most difficult periods in all of human history. These feel like apocalyptic times. The entire world is contending with the coronavirus pandemic, which continues in spite of vaccinations, mask mandates, and lockdowns. Millions have died. Hospitals are being overwhelmed.

On Thursday our own city of Albuquerque made the national news when our two largest hospital systems, UNMH and Presbyterian, announced that they were activating crisis standards of care due to an "unsustainable and unprecedented level" of activity during the pandemic. UNMH has been operating at 140% of capacity. Our hospitals are being stretched to the limit in terms of space and staffing due to increasing COVID-19 hospitalizations and a high volume of patients with acute conditions.

Then there is the global climate change crisis, which was in the news a lot over the past two weeks, as representatives from nearly 200 countries met in Glasgow, Scotland, to try to reach agreement on more urgent action to avert the disastrous warming of our planet. An agreement was reached on Saturday, but, according to the *Washington Post*, it "does not achieve the most ambitious goal of the 2015 Paris accord — to limit Earth's warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 Fahrenheit) above preindustrial levels. Instead, delegations left Glasgow with the Earth still on track to blow past that threshold,

pushing toward a future of escalating weather crises and irreversible damage to the natural world.”

In times like these, Jesus urges us to beware of false prophets, of climate change deniers and conspiracy theorists who claim that COVID-19 is a hoax. In times like these, Jesus counsels us not to panic, not to be alarmed, but to remain calm and to be patient. In times like these, Jesus holds out the hope that on the other side of all this pain and suffering there is the promise of new life, that ultimately God’s new day will dawn.

The other scripture passage we heard this morning came from the Letter to the Hebrews, which was probably written several years before Mark’s gospel. It was written to a community of Christians who were also facing difficult times and were in need of strength and encouragement. They were experiencing abuse and persecution and were growing weary under the strain. They had become weak in the knees, and they were in danger of losing heart.

The Letter to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus’ offering of himself opened for them and for us a new way of living, free from guilt and fear. As baptized and forgiven people, we can live before God with confidence. We can hold fast to hope without wavering, even in the face of the turmoil going on all around us. And we don’t have to do it alone, because we practice our faith in community, encouraging one another and motivating one another to love our neighbors and to engage in good deeds.

Yes, we live in difficult and unprecedented times, with a coronavirus pandemic that won’t give up and a climate crisis that will get worse before it gets better. But we have each other and we have the love and support of God as we go through it together. Thanks be to God. Amen.