

## ***Stones Thrown Down***

Mark 13:1-8

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As the gospel according to Mark arrives at our text for today, Jesus has been battling religious leaders – the Pharisees, the Herodians, the Sadducees, and the chief priests and scribes – in the Great Temple of Jerusalem. The Great Temple, in Jewish religion known as the “House of the Holy,” was the center of the universe, and one of the most impressive structures in the ancient world. This is the temple that God told King Solomon to build the massive temple in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE, replacing all the local sanctuaries and altars in the hills, and became the center of Judaism. The temple was erected with giant stones, moved by slave labor, forming massive walls, only entered through guarded gates. The temple itself was a religious symbol of might, fortress, immovability, and eternity. The Great Temple was considered the dwelling place of God, the place where God resided on earth, and the temple’s inner sanctum was so holy that only the high priest could enter.

We preface the story this way so that we can read the beginning line of our text today with the proper emphasis.

### **Mark 13:1-8 (NRSV)**

As Jesus came out of THE temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” 2Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

3When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, 4“Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” 5Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. 6Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. 7When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. 8For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.

After feverish religious debate in THE Great Temple, Jesus came out of the temple, and on their way out, a disciple was moved by the size of the stones and the buildings the Great Temple contained. What large stones and large buildings!

Jesus responded not with affirmation, but with APOCALYPSE, with a revelation from God of hidden things. For while the size of those stones may impress, not one, says Jesus, will be left upon another. All the stones will be thrown down, not one will remain on top of another, scattered stones will be left to remind of the house that once contained God.

What is revealed by the words of Jesus, what is hidden from the disciple who was so impressed by earthly majesty, is that the trajectory of things is not what it seems. Greatness will be different than it seems, power will be different than where it seems, God is not where you think. Jesus is not just revealing what is to come, he is also revealing the fact that we, like the disciple, misunderstand it now. What the great walls of the temple withhold, what they mislead about, is that God is not contained by them, but bursting through them. What is hidden from view is that God is on the loose, all stones, all walls, are as good as thrown down.

This hidden truth, that God’s presence is not limited to the temple, is both liberating and threatening. Liberating because God is not confined, liberating because humans are not distanced, liberating because the world that so desperately needs a good and giving God to save it, has one.

That the stones are thrown down, though, if we’re honest, also is a bit threatening. The walls of the temple, like the walls of the church, make it easier to compartmentalize God in our lives. Keeping God here in these halls allows us to receive divine truths but not have them mess up and reconfigure the rest of our lives.

Sometimes we Christians go to church for the purpose of stabilizing and taming the incursions of a living, interrupting God.<sup>1</sup> But when we come to the Great Temple in church this morning, and we discover massive stones thrown down, we realize that God is not contained in the church, and the container where we sometimes like to store God isn't going to work.

Then Jesus and the disciples went, walked, to the Mount of Olives, opposite the temple. On the way, presumably, the disciples had time to think about what Jesus had said about the stones thrown down. Tell us, when will THIS be, they asked, when will the stones be thrown down? What will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished? When will the world change, as you promise, and how will we know it is happening?

Jesus' next move was cryptic. Rather than identify a sign, Jesus instead offered admonition, "beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and lead folks astray." All of a sudden, notice the shift has gone from the temple to the human, from the place where God is not limited, the temple, to the place where God is in fact possible, the human. The sacred space of God has moved, in this revelation of a hidden truth, from the majestic halls and walls of the temple, to the unassuming, humble and broken human body.<sup>2</sup> The sanctuary that Christ reveals, the one in you and in me, requires that we be guards and curators of the authentic presence of God within us, that part of us that is profoundly Christian, giving, loving, outgoing, compassionate, devoted.

In the words of Teresa of Avila, "Christ has no body now on earth but yours . . . Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ looks out on a hurting world; yours are the feet with which he goes about doing good; yours are the hands with which he is to bless now."

No one gets this more than Hannah Turner. When Hannah was 9 years old, she and her mom spent a chilly Thanksgiving Day serving meals at a homeless shelter. Hannah was surprised to see one of the men with ripped shoes and no socks. So she pulled off one of her sneakers, and her tiny pink socks, and gave them to the man. The next day, Hannah and her mother donated 100 pairs of new socks to the shelter, and a new organization was born called Hannah's Socks, based on Hannah's idea that no one should go without something as basic as a pair of socks. Hannah's has collected and donated over 100,000 pairs of socks to neighbors in need, all in the spirit of Hannah's wish, "I want them to know we care."<sup>3</sup> Christ has no body now on earth but yours. Take care that no one leads you astray.

Jesus knows, too, that the most powerful one that can lead us away is Fear. Wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines, struggles of every kind, the kinds of scary things that can cause us to forget who and whose we are, cause us to go astray. The stuff that changes the face of the earth, and the stuff that feels like it does: family strife, unemployment, illness, loss, lost hopes. Life's hard knocks can make the promises of God seem impossible, and can make God's holy sanctuary and dwelling place, you, seem vacant and hardly divine. AND YET the final revelation of hidden truth in our text for today is assurance – "do not be alarmed, for the end is yet to come."

The great preacher and theologian Frederick Buechner claims that Christianity comes down to a single plot, in spite of the Bible's extraordinary variety. It is one that can be simply stated: God creates the world; the world gets lost; God seeks to restore the world to the glory for which God created it.<sup>4</sup> God comes to us to say, this world is not the one I intended, this world is not your ultimate home. I am still working, and will work, through you and billions of other sanctuaries who walk the earth, to make this world, my world in all of its goodness and fullness," this is good news, the beginning of good news. The end is coming, and by golly by Christ it has something to do with you and me.

God and the will of God and the greatness of God are not contained in any temple, for the God of all is on the loose, the God of all makes sanctuary not in stones or walls but in you and in me and in nine year old girls and her mother, so do not be afraid, the end is yet to come, the birth has begun.

The call of today's text seems amplified by these words of the poet Rilke:

I live my life in widening circles  
that reach out across the world.  
I may not complete this last one  
but I give myself to it.

I circle around God, around the primordial tower.  
I've been circling for thousands of years  
and I still don't know: am I a falcon,  
a storm, or a great song?<sup>5</sup>

Hear the Word of God in the gospel according to Mark this day, "You, my holy sanctuary, my great song of worship, let your life resound!"

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<sup>1</sup> Bishop Will Willimon, Pulpit Resource, 11/15/2009.

<sup>2</sup> Vernon Robbins, "Rhetorical Ritual: Apocalyptic Discourse in Mark 13," *Vision and Persuasion: Rhetorical Dimensions of Apocalyptic Discourse*, ed. G Carey and L G Bloomquist, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.hannahssocks.org/>

<sup>4</sup> As quoted in Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Discovering a Life of Faith*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2003, p. 165.

<sup>5</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, "I Live My Life in Widening Circles."