

Discernment, Patience, Hope: When the Buildings Fall

Tall buildings were not a feature of the town I grew up in. Even the terrain around Lake Charles, Louisiana, is flat – flat as pancake, or flat as a rice field, which is more to the point. The only panoramic view in Lake Charles is from the top of the Jean Lafitte Bridge on Interstate 10. The bridge has to be fairly tall to let the barges go under it on their way to and from the Intracoastal Canal. Crawfish mounds were the closest things we had to hills. The only skyscrapers were the cracking towers and the smokestacks of the oil refineries.

Imagine my delight in the Fall of 2001 when I got to organize a meeting in New York City. I had almost reached my fiftieth birthday without having made it to the Big Apple, but come that September, I would give my regards to Broadway, say hello to Times Square, and see for myself the twin towers of the World Trade Center.

Then came “9/11,” as we have come to call that day. I still went to New York City that September. With a group of freshly-ordained pastors whose mentor I was pretending to be, I approached the site of those grand buildings: twisted steel, powdered concrete, a thin column of acrid smoke wafting its way toward heaven.

I don’t suppose any of us will be able to read the 13th chapter of Mark without thinking of 9/11, and of the chaos and anxiety that followed. Those memories will never leave us.

It seems the people of Mark’s church in the later years of the first century felt much the same way about the fall of the temple in Jerusalem. Those grand buildings symbolized for them the presence and the faithfulness of God. To be sure, before the temple fell, times were uncertain. The Romans occupied the land. There were wars and rumors of war. But at least there was the temple, its walls high and straight, its altars busy, its priests in charge. The temple was a reassuring presence in troubled times – something to keep faith alive.

Like a chorus of Gomer Pyles recently arrived from Mayberry, Jesus’ disciples gawk as he comes out of the temple. “*Golly*, Teacher. **Look at what large stones and what large buildings!** You don’t get buildings like these back home.”

“Do you see these great buildings? Jesus replies, “Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

He was right, of course. A rebellion against Rome was brewing. In the month of September, 70 AD, the forces of Rome, under the command of Titus, son of Emperor Vespasian, captured the city and destroyed the temple. Hardly one stone was left upon another.

The incipient church of Jesus Christ, wobbling on toddler's legs, must have hung on every word of today's text. In the next verse, the scene shifts. Jesus and a few disciples are sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple. "Tell us more," the disciples plead. "Tell *exactly* what the future holds. When will the kingdom come? When can we expect the end?"

This Jesus will not do. He does give hints, however. *There will be phonies who try to lead you astray. They will claim to come in my name and say, "I am he." Don't listen to them. There will be wars and rumors of wars. There will be earthquakes and famines, but don't lose heart. "This is but the beginning of the birthpangs."*

Those words of Jesus must have sounded both troubling and reassuring for the first readers of Mark's Gospel. *Troubling* because Jesus refuses to give precise predictions. He publishes no timelines, marks no squares on the calendar, issues no sell-by dates. *Reassuring* because something better is being born. The present is a vast delivery room, Jesus says, and the agonies we feel now comprise the birthpangs of God's future.

How should you and I, from our perspective some 2000 years later, hear these words of Jesus? I hear at least three contemporary notes sounding in this ancient, but surprisingly timely, passage.

The first note is a call for *discernment*. "Be careful," Jesus warns the church. "Be careful of those who would lead you." Lots of folks can talk a good game, use the right words, strike impressively pious postures, but upon closer inspection, they turn out to be religious waterbugs, skimming along the surface of the faith.

Surface skimmers are common these days. Some offer a cross-less religion, a Christianity without tears. Others hawk a gospel of success: *Love Jesus, and he will help you win the lottery*. Still others wed the faith to politics and demand uncritical obedience to those in high office, not matter if they are inveterate liars, insatiable narcissists, or sickening sycophants.

There are false voices and there are true ones, our text reminds us. It doesn't tell us exactly how to distinguish one from the other, but it does caution us not to follow the flashiest spokesperson or the path of least resistance.

Beware of false prophets. Beware of hype. Beware of leaders who are eager to baptize the *status quo*. Beware of those who claim to further God's agenda, but do not but do not do justice, love mercy, or walk humbly with God.

The first note is *discernment*.

The second note is *patience*. Believers are not to get too excited about this or that event or to assume that it portends the final coming of the kingdom. *Crank it down a notch or two*. Take the long view. Time is in God's hands, not ours. Be patient.

This is not advice an activist church wants to hear, is it? It smacks of complacency in the face of a host of evils.

- How can we be patient when upwards of 3,000 neighbors are homeless in Tallahassee on any given night?
- How can we be patient when the waiting list for subsidized child care runs to the thousands?
- How can we be patient when our own elected officials deny millions access to affordable health care?

Our text does not urge us to be patient with injustice. It tells us to be patient with God. "God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year." Not on our timeline, but on God's.

Meanwhile, we are not called to be *successful*. We are called to be *faithful*. Even our most earnest efforts to do good will not bring in the kingdom, however much they point the world in the right direction. We cannot right every wrong or fix everything that's broken. And if we worked a tad less frenetically, we might take more pleasure in being faithful.

Patience! It's God's world, not ours.

The third note sounding in this text is *hope*. Pain does not equal defeat. The woes are real, but they do not have the final word. Wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines – the list goes on – aging pipes, disappearing parking spaces, rising utility bills,

over-taxed schedules, cancer, Alzheimer's Disease, death, grief, longing for those we have lost. The woes are real, and we cannot escape them. Indeed, to be Christian is to be vulnerable, to be liable to suffering. We cannot love the world as God loves the world without suffering its woes.

But real as they are, the woes will not determine the future. Faith does not rest in what we can see. **"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen"** (Hebrews 11:1).

Where do Jesus' disciples look for hope? Not to those grand buildings across the valley that have made such an impression, but to Jesus himself, who is about to suffer his own woes, and to be brought tumbling down. **"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,"** Jesus says in John's Gospel (2:19). That temple was destroyed, and it was raised up, all reasonable expectation to the contrary.

Do not lose heart, this text urges us. We are living in the delivery room, not the morgue. "This is but the beginning of the birthpangs."

Eyes can be deceiving, you see. What looks like defeat might really be victory. The rubble of a ruined temple can give birth to resurrection, and the woes that tear at our hearts today might be labor pains. Who knows? Who can see beyond the pain? Not you. Not I. Not yet.

Just when we are closest to despair, two parents appear at this font of blessing, and place their child in God's strong hands, and we say, Welcome!

Do not be led astray, Christians friends. Be patient. Be hopeful. Christ is alive, and the future is in God's hands.