

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Holding Hope

Mark 13:1-8

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Jesus famously and hauntingly foretold the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. It's hard to overstate and overestimate how striking of a statement this was for him. "What big stones..." they had said. "What magnificent buildings..." they had said.

It was true by all accounts-- it was massive and beautiful. It projected permanence, the permanence of the presence of the living God. It was intended to produce the result that it did produce in the eyes and hearts of the seers: this thing, which looks like it has stood forever, will go on standing forever. This thing, which looks so magnificent to our eyes, will continue to be magnificent on and on and on.

The magnificent, mighty physical structure of the temple was the emblem of the whole religious system. The temple was the host and the aim of the system of sacrifices, prayers, atonements, and pilgrimages. It was the prime physical embodiment that God still lives.

It was that and more. It was the emblem of the system, shall we say, of all creation—or at least all of creation that you know and see and engage. The temple's mere existence in the particular way it existed, perched on the highest peak in the most important city, gave you a feeling that the world was not a boundless uncertain mystery, but a finite thing that could be comprehended. And Israel was not just the floormat to ruthless forces of empire, but a thing of beauty and goodness, or at least held the potential for beauty and goodness as long as the temple stood.

When pilgrims arrived at the temple from far-off places, they sang Psalm 134, "Come bless the Lord all you servants of the Lord. Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the Lord! May the Lord bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth." Blessing comes to God at the temple. Blessings from God flow from the Temple to all creation.

In a world tenuously perched on the razor's edge of Rome's empire, the temple—even if it was not what it was supposed to be--was the last visual stalwart against despairing that everything was lost. In their eyes, it was the citadel of truth, the Helm's Deep of hope, the Alamo of defiant faith. That's not to say the temple itself was weaponized as a fort, but to say how it represented hope in the eyes and hearts of those who considered themselves blessed for merely looking upon it. It projected all things good, all things stable, a universe that was trustworthy, a God who was faithful.

All else can fail and fall; empires can rage; the whole world can seem like it's falling down around you, but the temple must remain because God must remain.

“It’s coming down,” he said.

“What?” they said.

“It’s coming down,” he said.

“What is?” they said.

That. This. All of it. No stone will be left here upon the other; all will be thrown down.

I want to try to get inside the heads and hearts of those who heard Jesus say the temple is coming down. Not because we can inhabit their historical, social, or theological location in relationship to Rome or the temple or much else. But because there may be a time when a few stacked stones in your life come crashing down, too. There may come a time when you watch things you care about be dismantled and destroyed. And then what?

The temple coming down is as if you are hearing that the symbols and structures of your existence are going to come crashing down around you. It’s hearing that the things you’ve taken for granted as existing--because simply they exist--will crumble. It’s basically hearing that the world as you know it is over. Everything else Jesus says in Mark 13—and it’s a lot of symbolic and harrowing signs—like wars and famines, sufferings of all kinds, the stars falling from the sky, all of it begins and ends in the ears and eyes of his hearers with the temple. Because if everything else goes wrong, but the temple stands, we’re going to be ok. But if the temple falls, that means everything else is already gone, too. It’s apocalyptic.

Apocalyptic. We can talk about it as a literary genre that flourished for about 400 years around the time of the writing of the New Testament. We can talk about its characteristics, like visions, symbols, numerology, surreal beasts, sea monsters, and cosmic collapse. Daniel... Revelation... Mark 13. Or we can talk about apocalyptic as what life feels like when things crash around you, in a personal relationship that crashes and burns, or when you feel like what you’ve worked for and hoped for your nation is dismantled or an institution you care about is gutted or your career is derailed or your health falls apart.

Apocalyptic. We can remember that millions of people today are not just feeling apocalyptic overtones about their frustrations at the current state of their lives or using apocalyptic as a literary device but are living and dying in one--in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, Haiti... Entire countries look like places of unanswered prayer and unanswerable suffering. People around the world are living and dying in desperate situations. Whatever challenges you figure you face as a Christian here and now, Christians in history and around the world have held firm to their faith and their hope through much, much worse than we can possibly imagine.

In fear or distress in apocalyptic times, our eyes can still turn to the witness of the faithful who have been through it. Those who have been in prisons, enslaved, persecuted, silenced, mocked, abused. St. Paul endured in suffering, and from it, he wrote encouragement: “We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying

in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. (2 Corinthians 4)

Maybe because I wonder how my faith stands up to real suffering and crisis, I've always been drawn to accounts of Christians in prisons and those who have endured the worst of times, like St. Paul and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Alfred Delp. I'm also drawn to stories of martyrs, so many across the centuries. I think of St. Agnes in Rome, the young girl in the 4th century who faced down a young Roman noble who decided she was to be his property. She resisted. She suffered, and she died. The church has never forgotten her.

These are the kind of stories that give hope when the temples fall. The nuns and monks in Assisi under Nazi occupation in WWII, hiding their Jewish neighbors. The Protestant village of Le Chambon in France, who gave similar refuge. These are folks who couldn't stop the evil forces of empire from dominating their towns, but they knew what to do right under its nose.

Alfred Delp, a priest executed in Germany for resisting the Nazis wrote from his prison cell, "Perhaps what we modern people need most is to be genuinely shaken, so that where life is grounded, we would feel its stability; and where life is unstable and uncertain, immoral and unprincipled, we would know that, also, and endure it. Perhaps that is the ultimate answer to the question of why God has sent us into this time, why He permits this whirlwind to go over the earth, and why He holds us in such a state of chaos and in hopelessness and in darkness-and why there is no end in sight." (Advent of the Heart)

Christians haven't always done the right thing, of course. We know that. I don't mean to whitewash history at all. But, and this needs to be said, our hope is made strong by those who have. And there have been many--many who have watched the walls fall and gone right into the apocalyptic scene in the name of Jesus. To enter into a life with God in faith is to enter into a relationship with those before us and all around us who show the way. To know them and love them is the way to keep your faith and your hope when it seems like the stones are crumbling down. And so the author of Hebrews encourages those who suffer, "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful."

"Let us keep the hope... let us keep meeting together..." What does this mean, but we need one another? Remember, there may come a time when you have to do something hard but right, something costly but good as the foundations of the world tremble. There may come a time when you will have to lay down your cloak of comfort and take up the cross of Christ.

For the first readers of the gospel of Mark, this was virtually assured. The first generations of Jesus' followers forged their faith in the crucible of suffering, and they flourished. The church didn't need a state that sang its songs or protected its rights. The church needed a confession and a baptism, a loaf of broken bread, and some songs to sing into the night.

They didn't need buildings made of huge, beautiful stone; they were living stones of a temple, not made with human hands. They came together. They worshipped. They provoked one another to love and good deeds. And encouraged one another day by day. Let's not romanticize their lives, but also let us not forget their witness. When the whole world fell down around them, their eyes were on Jesus. And because of this, and only because of this, did they hold on, and the Christian witness endured.

Christianity is for when the world falls apart. When your world falls apart, that's when Jesus is right there. Or what is the cross for? This is the meaning of the falling of the temple. Even if it falls and everything with it, keep your eyes open; this is not the end but just the beginning of all that is going to be made new.

When the heartache becomes too much to bear alone, we discover we do not bear it alone. We enter what one Russian mystic called the "deep silence of God," what another calls the "solace of fierce wilderness," or for the psalmist: the awareness of the inexhaustible presence of God. "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I rise, you are there, if I lay down, you are there, if I descend to the depths, you are there. Even if I went to the ends of the earth, your right hand would hold me fast."

Or, again as St. Paul describes it, "Suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."

When the world falls down, the people of Jesus rise up and follow the one who himself was brought low, brought to death, even death on a cross, and rose from the grave, himself from destruction to resurrection. The whole world may fall; we will help one another stand. All may descend to darkness; we will shine as lights. All may seem hopeless. We hold hope. We will hold hope in the one who said, "I am with you always, even to the very end."

Thanks be to God.