

26th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 11.17.24

Daniel 12:1-3

“At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.

Mark 13:1-8, 13-18, 21-23

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?”

Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For 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 birth pangs... The one who endures to the end will be saved.

But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; someone on the housetop must not go down or enter the house to take anything away; someone in the field must not turn back to get a coat. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that it may not be in winter. ... And if anyone says to you at that time, “Look! Here is the Messiah!” or “Look! There he is!”—do not believe it. False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be alert; I have already told you everything.” (425)

A book I didn’t order in time for the writing of this sermon is *Islands of Abandonment*. Subtitled *Nature Rebounding in a Post-Human Landscape*, it’s by investigative and nature journalist Cal Flyn who, it seems, put these two impulses together for a book described in one review as capturing “...the dread, sadness, and wonder of beholding the results of humanity’s destructive impulse, and...arrives at a new appreciation of life.”

It joins a whole subgenre lately: podcasts, blogs, social media accounts all focused on, fascinated by, places built, destroyed, and abandoned, places built for purposes that no longer hold, from shopping malls to deserted towns to old churches on forgotten street corners or vast prairies.

There's one where I walk the dogs in the morning, an abandoned place that always feels like it should be further away than it actually is. An old dam and power station that's well past coming apart feels like an ancient ruin from some long-ago civilization. Was the station deemed too small? And how long ago? A much bigger one, further up, with a big reservoir in a bowl on the side of October Mountain: did this one take its place?

Things change. Everything changes.

There was a time when I didn't know that.

I've told you a million times about that time when I was a kid and I was sifting through my dad's map collection. A fan of *National Geographic*, he'd collected all the maps that came inserted in the monthly magazine over the years.

Looking at a map of Africa, I must have said something about what I saw there. He replied, off the cuff, distracted, doing other things at his desk, that half of what was on the map was irrelevant now. I was stunned, really unnerved. How can the world change like that?

I'd say there was a time when our whole culture seems not to have known this. Remember, if you're of a certain age, when the most dreadful thing was discovering your whole life had been mapped out before you even had a say in it? I watched *The Graduate* with the boys once, probably during the pandemic. They were maybe 14 and 16 then. They liked it. But they didn't get it.

"What's wrong with that guy?" Tobias asked when we'd finished it.

Benjamin Braddock, the main character, floating in his parents' pool. Turns out he didn't want to "go into plastics." "He didn't want the life everyone kept pressing on him," I explained. "Life on the conveyor belt of expectation and dull accomplishment."

"Seems like a pretty good life to me," Tobias said. Life guaranteed. No big questions hanging over you. Not even all that many small ones.

The end of the church year is upon us, which means we're awash in the genre that turns out isn't so new. Stories of abandoned places or crushed places, stories of what's left when everything of the known world seems to have fallen to destruction: the end of the church year puts us with Jesus toward the end of his life, this event we just heard about somewhere between his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. He'd come to confront the Temple authorities, to confront the whole Temple structure with its power hierarchy and attending exploitation of the poor.

We met such a one last week, a widow who gave her two last copper coins to the Temple, surrendered into the Temple treasury. She's remembered in much of Christian thought as an

example of faithful giving. But I think Jesus meant for us to notice her as an example of how ruthlessly the Temple was willing to take from those who had nearly nothing to give.

Not that the Temple is so singular in exercising power like this. Congress just moved to cut SNAP benefits by \$30 billion dollars. Food stamps. Free school lunch is also a controversial idea.

It's for this, I supposed last week, that Jesus seemed nonplussed at the destruction of the Temple. It was beautiful, yes, and impressive. It gave structure to the whole of the people Israel and Judea, yes. But was it really all it was purported to be? The point of connection between the created world and its creator God, between humanity and their Lord? Jesus wasn't convinced. It had become subsumed by corruption.

As for the disciples, they seem never to have even questioned its worthiness. Like me with my father's maps and the unchangeable earth I took great comfort in their representing, so they of Temple, so distraught now that Peter, James, John, and Andrew took Jesus aside once they were up the Mount of Olives to ask him privately, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?"

Their reaction seems to have awakened Jesus to the actual risk of it all: "Beware," he says. "Beware that no one leads you astray," as if he knew that, when things come unlashd from their moorings, people will look all over the place for what seems stability and orientation, security, sureness of footing, maybe a strong man who promises to save the day, to clear the way, to vanquish the enemy and rescue the good. It's an impulse opportunists will make the most of, we might feel we know all too well. "Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray."

Jesus said this long before the Temple would fall, around forty years before it would fall. He lived and ministered around the year 30, and Rome attacked the Temple and its people beginning in the year 68, following a revolt the Jews staged earlier that decade. Forty years hence: thus, Jesus' tacit admission that he didn't know when it would happen, only knew *that* it would happen.

This which was though unimaginable to most people. ("What large stones these are, and what large buildings!" the disciples are remembered to have said, as if nothing built so grand could ever come to ruin.)

To those astute to history's rumblings, to society's tremors, wounds and scars, such a thing isn't unimaginable. No, it's practically inevitable. You don't have to be the Messiah to know that. And not even the Messiah, apparently, can change that.

Is it wrong to regard such events as inevitable, inexorable? Is it laziness or a failure to take responsibility, this recognizing of something happening, or even yet to happen, and to feel it as all but done?

Of course, by the time of the writing of this gospel narrative, it already had been done. This gospel is thought to have been written around the year 70 or 80, practically from the very moment when Rome had struck back and was continuing in the dread toil of doing their worst, the city burned to ruin, the people forced into the surrounding hills, their villages destroyed, their vineyards trampled and farmland salted. Rome was on the march—and whatever threat the people had once posed to the empire in their attempt at revolt was put to rest, if ever it actually was. Because, really, what were they when measured up against the empire? David and Goliath, if David's slingshot got taken away.

Not that the people were holding that in mind, the unlikelihood that revolt would work out well for them, would achieve its aims. No, I imagine they still had in mind a revolt staged two centuries earlier, a successful one, for a time, one still celebrated at the festival Hannukah.

Then it was the Greeks who reigned, the Seleucid Empire. The emperor, Antiochus IV Epiphanes had made moves to put a statue of himself in the Temple. A desolating sacrilege, it would come to called, this imperial move that some among the people wouldn't stand for, a tacky likeness of the ruler in a place set to a purpose altogether more beautiful and true.

Imagine such a tacky statue, if you can. Imagine such a sacrilegious installation, if you will.

The Maccabee brothers would take this as a trigger finally to revolt, these whose name is Hebrew for hammer. With a name like that, what choice did they have? Their armed insurrection would be victorious, for a time. They'd be celebrated, these brothers Maccabee, in the apocryphal books, 1st and 2nd Maccabees, ancient texts but not sacred texts, in neither the Jewish nor the Protestant Bible.

What is in both the Jewish and the Protestant Bible, and that comes from the same time, is the book of Daniel. One of the earliest examples of Apocalyptic literature, daring a look past the horizon of the known world, daring a look back at the tide that will wash everything away. Apocalyptic dots the Old Testament, more fully shows up in the New—in the Gospel of Mark, in the Revelation of John, where too begins a filling out of the notion not of insurrection but of resurrection.

We might assume resurrection was a strictly Christian hope and experience. But it is rather a hope and experience that arises amidst all sorts of worldly injustice and faith in an eternal God.

Something abiding beyond the envelopes of history, something abiding beyond our own lives, each and all. If the eternal touches into the created, as surely it must, than the created will find its place amidst eternity.

The book of Daniel counsels something very different from the books of the Maccabees: endurance, faithful perseverance. Resistance but not revolt, patient resistance and not violent insurrection. Michael would take care of the problem, the book of Daniel professes, that great angel of the Lord, faithful to the people. Yes, things would fall apart. Danger would rule the streets. Injustice would be rampant. The people must endure, must be faithful to their charter, living amidst a social imaginary—those powerful shared ideas that hold a people together—that was all about justice, all about lovingkindness. To fight would be to lose, both because the empire would fight harder, these who had the capacity not just to fight but also to destroy, and because to fight would be to become as the empire is, a people formed by force rather than by mutual care and sheltering love.

Jesus would counsel the same, of course. Place your faith not in insurrection but in resurrection. So: resist, don't revolt; endure, don't avenge. And forty years later, Mark would remember this counsel, counsel all the more urgent now for the imposition of the empire being all the more acute, all the more menacing. Now not the Greeks but the Romans, theirs was nevertheless a rule not about the people but about power, plain and simple, same as it ever was. Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greek, Rome: they were all just about power, domination through violence and even all-out war. Some were bad for the nations they engulfed. Others were worse for the nations they engulfed. A matter of degree. Same as it ever was.

Ched Myers, a scripture scholar with a particular affection for the gospel of Mark, writes of this sermon, portions of which we heard today, Jesus' so-called "Little Apocalypse," that it has two parts. "Both...reiterate the counsel of the prophet Daniel, who two centuries earlier during the Maccabean revolt had urged the faithful to resist both the imperial beast and the delusions of militant nationalism. At the heart of the sermon is Jesus' call to abandon Jerusalem because of the apocalyptic conviction that a truly just social order cannot be established by the sword. The disciples are instructed to 'wait and watch' for the fall of the powers and a genuine transformation of the world."

Wait and watch for the fall of the powers and then press on for a genuine transformation of the world.

We have a beautiful country. We have an inspired ordering of things, and so many public servants set about the task of making life better for people. Many of us watch in horror as it seems an aim of the new administration is cynically to fill its ranks with people who want ruin, each new cabinet pick embodying the very opposite of what their department is *for*.

We have a beautiful country. It might come unraveled, which means maybe soon is coming a real chance for us to make something better, to bring new intention to so much we've forgotten.

Advent will soon be here, the first season of the new church year, a short one, a mere four weeks, a season whose central spiritual practice is this: wait and watch.

I've often felt it as a painful season because to hope is to recognize how what you hope for is not yet. To hope is sit pricked by the painful realities of what is now—all that makes unease, all that is unrest, all that is inexorable dread or dead ends we seem to be careening toward as if we ourselves want it all to end.

Advent is the coming of something new amidst all that seems to be ending painfully, sorrowfully. And how it comes, most surprising: a baby. A new baby. The birth of God laboring forth in our midst.

Walk with me while I wait, and I'll walk with you.

Patient resistance, faithful endurance.

Thanks be to God.