

Proper 28 Be of Good Cheer, God is in the Plan Mark 13:1-8

A sermon by the Rev. Richard C. Israel, Associate Rector, preached on November 15, 2009.

When I was a boy, I used to love to read a columnist in our afternoon newspaper who wrote chiefly human interest stories. He would feature the person who grew the largest squash or watermelon, local “Good Samaritans” and offbeat stories of life in the south. My best friend was once featured in the column when he “caught” a 5 pound bass that jumped into his rowboat.

One of the people with whom the columnist developed an ongoing friendship and about whom he would write once or twice a year was a woman named, Mattie Dear. Mattie Dear was an elderly African American who lived in a tarpaper shack in rural Mississippi, a granddaughter of slaves who was nearly blind. She would write letters about the challenges she faced in life, living as she did in poverty, but always exhibiting faithfulness that was inspiring. The trademark of her correspondence was the concluding sentence to every letter she wrote, “Be of good cheer, God is in the plan.”

I thought of Mattie Dear as I read the lesson we just heard that comes from a form of biblical literature call apocalyptic writing. The word “apocalypse” means *revelation*. Apocalyptic literature is concerned with the end of human history. The writing is full of symbolism about cosmic upheavals and final judgment, but its purpose is to provide encouragement and hope to the faithful living in difficult circumstances. It is not coincidental that this chapter in Mark’s gospel known as “The Little Apocalypse” comes right before the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus.

When Jesus and his disciples came out of the temple, one of the disciples marveled at the beauty and grandeur of the architecture. Indeed, it must have been a magnificent site, especially to Jesus and his disciples who did not grow up in Jerusalem, but came from tiny, rural villages.

In the lesson we just heard, Jesus forecasts the destruction of the temple, the very heart of Israel’s identity as a nation. These stones at which the disciples gawked in amazement were huge, some measuring 37 ½ feet by 18 feet by 12 feet. Imagine, if you can the pillars and arches of this sanctuary, our home with God, in shambles.

Or if that is too hard, think of your own life. Who among us has not had times when our individual lives unravel, too. Have you ever had one or more of these feelings? “I’m falling apart! This is too much for me! My heart is broken! I feel betrayed! Nothing makes sense any more! Life is upside down!” When we live through events that evoke such feelings in us, we may experience, in effect, the end of the world as we have known it.

Remember the fear and betrayal we felt on 9/11 and we begin to identify with what the disciples must have felt when Jesus predicted the destruction of the temple. We can also identify with their questions can’t we? What awesome power could possibly wreak such destruction, and when would all this happen?

Jesus does not answer the disciples questions about how or when disaster may strike. In fact he warns them to beware of anyone who would tell you when the end times will come. The point of what Jesus says in this passage is not: go sit on a mountaintop and wait for me to come again. Neither is it to pull the covers over your head and go back to sleep. In contrast, Jesus says not even suffering and persecution are reasons for God's people to give up. Just because times are evil does not mean they are the end times. Jesus saw beyond the pain of his time—calling the threats to his faithful people “birth pangs” of something better that will come in God's providence. As Christ's followers we are called to live in hope in spite of the threats around us, to trust that God can use the adversity and suffering we experience to help us grow closer to him.

Gilbert Meilander wrote, “God ties our hearts to particular times, places and people—and then the same God tears us away from them so that we may learn to love him with all our heart, soul, strength and mind.”

Jesus came to initiate a new age, the beginning of a new humanity. It is the redemptive love of God revealed in Jesus that will transform the world. The dramatic events will not be stars falling from the skies or the temple being destroyed. The really dramatic events will be the triumph of love over fear, of people who trust that the God who created this world of beauty to which we are so attached has an even more beautiful creation to bring into being.

As we hear this gospel lesson, we need to hear it as a wake-up call. I do not believe God's future will be launched with a great assembly of people in the valley of Armageddon and a vengeful judge riding in on clouds to punish unfaithful people. Instead, God's future will come as Christ's people take greater responsibility to bear witness to the victory of love over fear by caring for the least among us and being more concerned with being reconciled to our enemies than “being right”.

Earlier this week leaders from all over the world gathered at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin to remember the fall of another intimidating structure, the Berlin Wall. For almost thirty years that wall stood as a symbol of the Cold War, separating families, denying people freedom, polarizing the world. Ironically, although many people died trying to scale that wall to freedom, it came down nonviolently, thanks to the witness to peace and freedom of countless people.

A German theologian, Helmut Thielicke, writing in the horrors of World War II, captured the hope by which Jesus calls us to live in these words, “He who knows who rules the last hour has nothing to fear in the next moment.” While we don't know when Christ's new creation will finally be consummated among us, it is enough to know that he has invited us to announce the coming of that day by living as people of hope, people who know the outcome of history. When danger threatens, as it has in every generation, we are to remain attentive to God's future, trusting in spite of the turmoil within and without, “that God is in the plan”.