

**A Sermon for 26th Sunday after Pentecost**

**November 17, 2024**



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**[Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost – The Episcopal Church](#)**

Mark 13:1-8

## Portents

In 1992, I was climbing up to Jerusalem – there is a steep hill on the side of the Kidron Valley, and my whole archeology group was laboring up the incline. Our leader wanted us to understand the phrase “up to Jerusalem” in real terms. I was younger then....

So we got to the top and huddled around some massive stones, some as big as this room. Our leader slapped one of them and said that Herod the Great built this mount, this base, for the Temple in Jerusalem, intending it to stand proudly for the ages. Seventy years after Herod, the Temple was destroyed. The mount, such a proudly built edifice, still stood, but its original purpose was gone. No Temple. The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple destroyed more than a building. It destroyed the Jews' entire understanding of themselves and their religious structure. It has never recovered the original meaning from 2000 years ago. For one thing, the priests were all out of a job – no Temple, no priests. Judaism changed from a centralized form of worship into a more diffused organization, with rabbis (who were teachers, not priests) leading gatherings of Jews in synagogues, which were places of learning rather than animal sacrifice. Judaism was changed forever. Most Jews think this was ultimately a good thing.

Today's Gospel reading from Mark was probably written about the time the Temple was destroyed, 70 AD. The writer couldn't miss the importance of the event and understood it as metaphor for cataclysmic change. In the Gospel reading, Jesus slaps the big stone and predicts that the whole thing will come tumbling down. Did Mark the Gospel writer mean that Judaism would come tumbling down? Jesus lived forty years before the Temple was destroyed, forty years before Mark wrote about Jesus, but it sounds like Jesus (and Mark) were on to something. They knew that times were changing.

Fast forward to the year 313, when Constantine was Emperor of the Roman Empire. Constantine, impressed by his winning a major battle, gave credit to God and promptly declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Was this a good thing? Well, it certainly put a stop to all the persecutions of early Christians. However, a lot of the original energy and excitement about Jesus Christ seeped out of Christianity. No longer in danger of death because of their beliefs, the early Christians started arguing about what it all meant and who was Jesus Christ anyway. The arguing went on for centuries.

The Church (with a capital C) became a mighty structure, very top-heavy and somewhat corrupt. A major housecleaning took place in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which we call The Reformation, reforming the big church by schism. Those who protested the old structure were called Protestants; those who wanted to purify the resulting church in England were called Puritans; Many new denominations resulted. There was considerable energy in all the off-shoot churches, as they felt they were starting something new. It was new birth, new life.

Fast forward to last week, when the titular head of the Anglican Church, the Archbishop of Canterbury resigned. He had been presiding over a dissolving worldwide church structure, and his resignation was just the latest sign that times are changing. Last weekend, our own diocese met in convention, and announcements were made about staff changes and an enlarging structure. To me, our own diocese seems top-heavy and out-of-touch. Will it come tumbling down, like the Jerusalem Temple, and like the Church at the Reformation?

Other changes have been occurring in our country recently, and we have no idea what all that means, but we know things will be different. Perhaps our country is headed into a new position in the world, perhaps no longer regarded as the leader of the free world. We'll see.

Many years ago, after climbing the hill to the Jerusalem Temple site, I took courses with a wonderful theologian named Phyllis Tickle. She had a terrific grasp of church history and a long view of what lay ahead. She foresaw major disruption, as destructive as the Reformation, coming down the pike. She called it The Great Emergence. She predicted that our church buildings, our top-heavy administrative structures, all our bishops, would all go down to the dust. That our cherished assumptions were not going to save our institutions, that the whole world and especially the churches were in for a major house cleaning. Phyllis Tickle was a life-long Episcopalian, but she discovered that cherished structures don't last forever. Her own church community met in an abandoned bakery. They had no expenses for building upkeep. They concentrated on their community, on their love of each other, of helping those in need.

Phyllis was a consultant to my beloved seminary, Seabury, from which I graduated twice, in 1993 with a masters degree, and in 2005, with an advanced degree. Shortly thereafter, my seminary was no more. What? What happened? It had been located on a city block in Evanston, Illinois, on the campus of Northwestern University. Heavily in debt and with no future in that format, the seminary sold its buildings and land and became a free agent, renting property for a while, then joining with another seminary that was on the skids, Bexley, to become Bexley Seabury. The new structure moved to Chicago. This is major. It changed the whole model of seminary education. Phyllis was proud of them from letting go of property, for jettisoning what was holding them back, and looking clear-eyed into the future.

We are in a time of enormous change, as a country, as a world-wide denomination, as a diocese, and as our own little community of New Life. Jesus had it right, when he stood next to the Temple in 30 AD and said it was all coming down.

But let us not live in fear. There is energy and excitement in change, and we will be part of it. This community is strong and exudes the love of God. Our best response is to love God, love our neighbor, and build God's kingdom on earth.

One of my closing blessings seems especially apt today:

May the Lord bless you and keep you.  
May the Lord shine upon you and be gracious to you.  
May God give you the grace never to sell yourself short,  
    Grace to risk something big for something good,  
    Grace to remember that the world is now  
        too dangerous for anything but truth  
        and too small for anything but love.  
So, may God take our minds and think through them,  
May God take our lips and speak through them,  
May God take our hearts and set them on fire  
    with God's goodness, love and truth.