



"In His Hands"

a sermon by

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Charlotte, NC

November 15, 2006

Our scripture lesson for this afternoon comes to us from the gospel of Mark, the oldest gospel, chapter 13:1-8. The first half of the book of Mark is dedicated to the story of Jesus' healing and teaching, but beginning in chapter 8 the story takes a turn as Jesus begins to foretell his suffering and death to the disciples, and to prepare them for the fact that the kingdom he represents is not of this world. Chapter 13 signifies his final discourse, an apocalyptic one, before his betrayal and crucifixion in the final 3 chapters of the book that follow. Jesus and his disciples have gone to the temple in Jerusalem for Passover when we pick up our text for today. From the beginning of Mark chapter 13.

“As Jesus 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 the kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.”

‘He’s got the whole world, in his hands. He’s got the whole wide world in his hands...’ Oh, man, I love that song, don’t you? What is there not to love about that song? He’s got the wind and the rain in his hands. He’s got you and me, brother, in his hands. He’s got little bitty babies in his hands- the whole world in God’s hands! That’s so great. When I was a kid whenever I heard this song I would think of God’s cupped hands cradling all of creation- like in a tiny- or, actually, enormous bird’s nest- and I was snuggled up in some corner of it, safe and warm along with everything and everyone else in this world. At some point in my life I truly believed that the world in God’s hands meant that nothing would ever go wrong. Everything was just kind of, cozy and sheltered. Those hands were fixed and nothing that was in them could ever be moved.

I guess the disciples might have felt something like this wandering around the temple grounds in Jerusalem with Jesus that day. They had traveled there for the holy days of Passover and were now taking in the sights. The temple in Jerusalem was enormous and it is easy to imagine them breathless and squinting up into the sun to marvel at the hundreds of columns now dwarfing them. We don’t have anything like this in Galilee. This was the high holy place. The temple in Jerusalem. Jesus had been talking for roughly 8 chapters now about God’s kingdom and perhaps the spectacle of the temple is what the disciples had in mind when they thought of the fixed reign of God that would have no end, that no one could quite fathom and where none could be moved. It’s easy to get caught up in visions of the grandeur - the kingdom seems almost within reach when you are staring at 5 ton blocks of limestone soaring up into the sky dedicated to the Lord our God and did you see the souvenirs? ‘Jesus, you’re not quite in the picture, could you just move in a little closer to Peter- put your arm around Peter- and perfect- ok, everyone smile!’ “Look, Teacher,” they said, “what large stones and what large buildings!” Surely this temple was fixed, and none in it could be moved.

Like that song that we sing, the disciples probably also found comfort in the idea of a secure, cozy, solid view of the world in God's hands that was as fixed and as sure and fortified as those giant blocks at the foundation of the temple. But what they and we long for is not what Jesus is offering. "Do you see these great buildings?" He says. "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down..." Understand what he is saying here. The center, the apex, of your religious life and culture, the heart of the economic life of the city, the institutions that you hold most dear, the center of the world as you know it, will be brought to the ground. And some people might die. Lots of people, perhaps. Jesus paints a picture of life under God that includes warfare and famine, disasters and suffering- a suffering, he would go on in later verses to say, that would include their own. "Nation will rise against nation," he says, "and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines." And I imagine that this vision of life under God's care isn't exactly what the disciples had in mind. Then again, Darfur and Sudan isn't exactly what I had in mind either. Neither is illness. Neither is death. In my mind the whole world in his hands isn't supposed to look like that. No, to me those things look, instead, like the *end* of the world and they seem to be everywhere that we look.¹

It must have felt this way to the disciples too because their response doesn't suggest that they are concerned about what will happen, or how it will come about. They want to know *when* so that they can get out of the way! Will there be signs? Tell us when, Jesus, so that we can be prepared and try to get out of this fallen, falling world unscathed. In our own way we do this too. We try to time the signs so that we can tame the coming of God's future and get out of the way, but it doesn't work like that. A friend of mine introduced me to the online 'Rapture Meter'- a website² dedicated to determining the degree of likelihood that the 'end' is near at any given time based on an assessment of 44 categories such as terrorist activity, economic and social indicators, etc. despite the fact that Jesus said that he himself did not even know the time. I guess it is supposed to be kind of like a spiritual Smokey the Bear holding up fire hazard signs in the national parks to tell when to be absolutely sure not to throw a match out the window because the whole thing could go up in flames at any minute.

The disciples are concerned about the when, but Jesus has another take on it altogether. He tells the disciples that they should be far more concerned about being deceived by those who suggest that their theology can spare them from the struggle than they should the struggle itself, for struggle will not cease until we cease to be broken but there is only one Savior. "When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed," He says. "This must take place, but the end is still to come... This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." Do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is still to come. It probably didn't occur to the disciples that the temple that seemed so secure was built to stand a season in God's time, but it was never meant to endure forever. In fact, in the war between the Jews and Rome the temple would soon fall and the city would burn. In the disciples' minds as they imagine what forces could possibly topple that temple, and in our own minds as our eyes scan the horizons of the world and the headlines of the paper each day we can't help but feel as though these must be signs of the end of the world as we know it.

¹ Perkins, Pheme. [The New Interpreters Bible Commentary](#) (Nashville: Abingdon) 1995. P. 685-687.

² www.raptureready.com. Reference provided for illustrative rather than informative purposes only.

It feels like the end is near when AIDS claims the lives of so many Africans each day, and war rages on in Iraq. As we fear nuclear armament in North Korea, and explosions are swapped endlessly between Israel and Palestine. When news of Sudan brings to light painful weapons of war that scar generations. When corruption abounds. When there are only a few hundred beds for the several thousand homeless in our city, or when the most intimate traumas that families must endure are exploited for the appetites of the public such as when O.J. Simpson releases a miniseries on how he would have committed the crime, had he actually done it, not to mention those countless things we carry home with us at the end of the day that make us feel that the world as we know it is simply coming crashing down. But Christ says that these things are not the end. They are the pain of labor as a new life is waiting to be birthed. A life that will replace the one that was never meant to endure forever. That will end the suffering. A life ushered in with the return of the Son of Man who says that nothing other than God's reign and God's glory will have the final word over God's people. A life that says that the future in God's hands does not mean we are delivered from the present, but that his hand is in that too. That the struggle that we endure today is the struggle of creation as she waits to be delivered into Christ's final promise, that the kingdom of this world will pass, but the kingdom of God will reign forever.

A Presbyterian missionary in Sudan said that if you were to fly or drive in to visit a Christian church in the region, you could expect to be greeted by a choir dressed in brightly colored robes carrying crosses raised high into the air as they sing elated songs to God to greet you. In worship you would be surrounded by music and praise unlike any you've ever known, and you could expect to be reduced to tears when, during the offering, the most anticipated time of the service, choirs take turns singing while the congregation leaps and dances to the offering table to bring forward their gifts to God which they throw down as if at the very feet of God in thanksgiving and celebration for all he has done.³

Less than a week before his death, Christ gave his disciples this word. Perhaps to help them persevere through the cross that he himself could not avoid but that he knew would not be the end of him or of us. When kingdoms battle and nations fall, when institutions crumble and it seems that death has the final word we are not to despair for these things are not the end. Instead Christ compels us to live in the faith that has seen life on the other side of the grave. To be prophets of a future that is not of our own making. Conversation partners with a world use to hearing only the cries of its own voice. Witnesses to the gospel that says that everything that was created has its term, and we await the birth of a new age. As disciples of Christ we are to live on the brink of Advent each day, recalling that we wait in the expectant hope of our Lord every moment. And so we can go boldly into the world armed with his promise that he does indeed have the whole world in his hands. And so a song of praise is fitting. Amen.

³ 2005 PCUSA Mission Yearbook for prayer and study, p. 313.