

Endings leading to new beginnings

The Bible is filled with stories of people engaging in faithful dialogue about the contemporary issues of their time. These stories can help us engage the difficult conversations of our own time. Mark 13:1-8 which recounts Jesus's dialogue with his disciples foretelling the fall of the Temple is especially relevant for us today.

“Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

What images come to your mind when you hear these words?

Maybe images of the World Trade Center, tumbling after the horrendous terrorist attacks. Maybe images of houses destroyed in a fire, or a flood, or a storm. Maybe images of the aftermath of bombings during WW II, and recently in Ukraine, Israel, Gaza, Lebanon, and we could go on and on.

Images of destruction. Images of devastation. We've all seen such images. Maybe you even experienced such destruction and devastation first-hand.

Thinking of such destruction makes us feel uneasy, alarmed, sad and angry. Maybe thinking of such destruction re-traumatizes us, and for a good reason. It is hard to see something that we thought and hoped would last forever, something we may even have helped build and created ourselves, fall to pieces.

I wonder how the disciples felt when they heard Jesus say these words, 'Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.'

They are looking in awe at the magnificent temple, which Herod the Great had expanded just recently and made it into one of the finest houses of worship in the Middle East. No expenses had been spared, the temple was built with white marble and gold, with rare woods and exotic materials from all over the known world. The temple was thought to be an indestructible building, something built for the ages – a permanent place where God would dwell and be worshiped forevermore.

I can imagine that the disciples were shocked, maybe unbelieving when Jesus said that this magnificent temple wouldn't last. How can this be?

But then of course they knew that the first temple that was erected in all its splendor in the very same place by King Solomon roughly a thousand years before didn't last forever. It was destroyed by the Babylonians who conquered the kingdom of Judah in the year 587 BCE and led the people into exile.

This was a devastating and traumatic event in the history of the people of Israel – their identity was lost. People even wondered if God, who, after all, dwelled in the holiest of space in the temple, was still with them.

There was this longing to go back home, to go back to Zion, to rebuild the temple and to be God's united people once more. So, when the Babylonian Empire was overthrown by the Persians roughly 80 years after the destruction of Jerusalem, and the Persian ruler allowed the Jewish people to return, the temple was rebuilt immediately – although very hastily and without the splendor of its predecessor.

In fact, people were making fun of this rather pitiful building – and hence Herod the Great saw the need 500 years later to expand it and even exceed size and splendor of Solomon's original temple.

I can imagine that the disciples feel uneasy as Jesus predicts that this temple will fall, just like the first one.

Oh no, not again, Jesus! What will become of the people of Israel when the temple is gone? What will bind us together? What will give us identity? Where will we find God? What will become of us?

But Jesus isn't just talking about the temple. In a few days, he will be betrayed, arrested, tortured, and crucified. Not one stone of his life, not one stone in the lives of those who followed him so faithfully will be left upon another.

Jesus announced his betrayal and death to his followers three times. The end is near. Oh no, Jesus! What will bind us together once you are gone? What will give us identity? Where will we find God? What will become of us?

Endings make us uneasy. I know that many among you are sad, disappointed, and even anxious, as your journey with close friends or groups come to an end.

This congregation, this community of faithful followers, when faced with pastoral leadership dilemmas, didn't crumble and fall. Firstly, this community has a strong foundation in Christ. Secondly, this community of faith is built on the witness of many who built this place, who kept it up, who made improvements over its 170-year history.

When Rev. Morley Mitchell retired, it was only one chapter in the book of St. Andrew's that came to an end. And every end leads to a new beginning.

A new chapter will be written. A new chapter has been written and together we are living that faith journey together.

When the first temple of Solomon in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians and the people of Judah were led into exile, they made a concerted effort to write down their stories, their songs, their prayers to keep the memory of their lives with God and their memory of their homeland alive.

From that point on, the presence of God wasn't just experienced in the temple, but through the sharing of those stories, prayers and songs in fellowship, joint worship, and the sharing of meals in the home. The Jewish people, who were dispersed again and again during history, created a new sense of identity – and identity that wasn't so much centered on the temple anymore, but in God's word and tradition.

And what a strong identity it has been! It helped the Jewish people survive through all turmoil and in many places.

Jesus was crucified, and his time with his disciples roaming the Judean and Galilean countryside came to an abrupt and traumatic end. But Jesus rose again on the third day. And the disciples were able, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to build a new community based on their experience with Jesus and then the risen Christ and share the good news of a new life for all creation with the world beyond Jerusalem.

We experience the repeated nature of time – every year, when we see life come to rest during wintertime and see it re-emerge with vigor in the spring. We go through various endings as we walk through life – and, so far, have always come out on the other side, dealing with the loss of the old and eventually embracing that new thing that followed.

We are people of faith who believe in the resurrection and a new life. May you always remember this, no matter what things come to an end in our lives. May we remember that when something ends in our life, we discover new beginnings to support our journey.

May we remember this whenever we feel that the world around is falling apart, when no stone in our lives is left upon the other – always knowing that God is still here with us and always will be, forevermore, and promises us to make all things new.

So, what can the church do to proclaim Jesus as the center and source of our moral ethics, even when temples fall, wars rage, and the earthquakes? How can we model basic decency and compassion? Caring for the vulnerable and protecting the weak? Honoring our neighbors and ministering with honesty amid entities that thrive on chaos, sowing discontent, and “nation rising against nation”?

As we, as a congregation wrestle with these questions, know this. Ultimately, there is a power that is greater than our religious systems (as symbolized by the Temple). It's longer lasting than the powers of evil (as symbolized by the Roman empire). And it's more effective than violence (Jesus's crucifixion).

It is the power of truth, honesty, discernment, advocating for and protecting the vulnerable, resisting authoritarian oppression, and casting a vision for the Realm of God.

This is what Jesus tells us standing beneath the towering temple. This is what Jesus' ministry, life, death, and resurrection were about. And this is who God is, what God does, and what God wants the church to be about.
Amen