

November 14, 2021
The Twenty-Fifth Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 28), Year B
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

1 Samuel 1:4-20
1 Samuel 2:1-10
Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18) 19-25
Mark 13:1-8

The Book of Genesis tells us that with Abraham God founded not only a new *religion*, but also a new *nation*. The founding of a nation requires two things: people and land. For the Hebrews, the “people” part was ensured forever by Abraham’s wife Sarah’s late-in-life pregnancy. The “land” part has proved more elusive over the ages.

For Jews of Jesus’ time, religious life revolved around the Temple in Jerusalem. Practically, the Temple was the only location used for conducting the rituals necessary to fulfill the covenant with God revealed through Moses. Symbolically, it was that and a whole lot more. That Temple was actually the Second Temple. The First Temple, built by King Solomon, had been destroyed about 650 years earlier. Rebuilding began about 50 years after that. Not long before the birth of Jesus, King Herod the Great conducted a massive reconstruction and expansion project. Remember, Herod was a Judean who ruled as a client to the Romans. Many Judeans were discontent with their Roman occupiers and the Judean leaders who served them.

About thirty years after the death of Jesus, one group of Judean rebels took control of Jerusalem. Like many other rebellions against the Romans, this one was doomed to fail. Four years after the takeover, the Roman army laid siege to the city. The siege ended about five months later with the destruction of the Second Temple. At that point Jews would have found their religious life as deeply fractured as their national life. The scale of that loss would have been massive. Ironically, coincidentally, or cruelly, the destruction of both the First Temple and the Second Temple occurred on the same date on the Hebrew calendar, which Jews still observe as an important fast day.¹ All that remains now of the Second Temple is the Western Wall. All three Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—claim the Temple Mount as a holy site. As a result it has been the location for further conflict over the centuries, and it remains so today.

The Gospel of Mark was almost certainly authored shortly *after* the destruction of the Temple. Jews would have been trying to make sense of a world that had come unglued; Jesus wasn’t the only purported messiah. Today’s short reading from Mark begins with Jesus and the disciples leaving the Temple in Jerusalem. One of the disciples comments on the impressive structure. In response, Jesus seems to prophesy the Temple’s destruction: “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”²

This portion of Mark is a form of apocalyptic writing. We get something similar in the other gospels, but we're more familiar with it from the Book of Revelation. Maybe Jesus really did prophesy the Temple's destruction. It seems more likely that folks wrote that into his biography, and that Mark is reflecting on actual events that already occurred, trying to find meaning in that tragedy. This reading is unsettling, and if you keep reading it just gets worse. Jesus goes on to foretell the persecution of his followers, and the coming of the Son of Man, about which one should stay watchful.

Coming to this reading this year somehow feels more real and more dangerous than it has in the past. I imagine the destruction of the Temple when I see the video from January 6. The siege of the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., felt like a tilting of the world to me. If the United States has something like a Temple Mount, it's the Capitol Building. Like the Temple, the Capitol is a location both of practice and of symbol. Its siege was also powerfully symbolic, and I expect that it is seen that way for people across the political spectrum.

Of course by that day our lives were already upended. The pandemic was part of it, but there was a lot more going on. A large portion of our nation's populace seems to be infected with something perhaps even more potent than COVID-19. It's a contagion that makes them anti-fact, anti-science, even anti-kind.

In my almost six years of serving at St. Thomas's, I have received exactly two emails from criticizing strangers, and both arrived since January 6. The first one came in May from someone who saw the rainbow flag flying above our main doors. The worst parts of his email are too rudely sarcastic or me to repeat here, but I'll give you one part of it: "I shall pass on joining y'all as I'm looking to join God in eternity through Jesus, our Lord."³ The implication of course is that we won't be there with him. The second email came just this past Friday from someone who saw our Black Lives Matter sign out front. She described herself as "appalled" and "disgusted," and then she said this: "... your behavior sickens me. I will be looking for another church to worship that has teachings as far from your teachings as possible. We need our religious organizations to unite not divide."⁴

Those two people won't be coming to church with us. And that's okay. There are plenty of churches where they can find people and pastors who agree with them. On the other hand, there aren't that many churches that share our understanding of the Good News of Jesus Christ. The comments of those strangers only emphasize the imperative for us to carry on with sharing that message.

Our church is not this building; our church is all of us. Still, the building is important. It's important for our Christian worship. It's also important for our Christian witness. These stones *will* come down one day. They just will. Not today or tomorrow or next month or next year or even ten years from now. But they will come down. That eventual tumbling doesn't lessen the value of this place right now. Our worship here matters. Our witness here matters. I am so glad we are back.

If I was to add another message out front, it would be about global warming. The Earth and its inhabitants have reached a moment of existential crisis. We can't keep denying it. Last Sunday I chatted with a parishioner who mentioned that one long-established theologian is now filtering all her work through the lens of the climate change. I replied that I've been so concerned about it that I've wondered whether every one of my sermons should be filtered through the lens of climate change.

For the last two weeks, the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference has been running in Glasgow. Generally known as COP26, it wrapped up on Friday. The Episcopal Church sent an official delegation. Unofficial participants included protestors whose leaders are mostly young women, Greta Thunberg among them. The participating nations reached an agreement yesterday. Time will tell how seriously the nations will take their commitments. Time will tell whether the crisis will be adequately averted.

I've actually only preached on today's lessons once before, back in 2009. The news then included speculation about the cataclysm that would happen when the 5,000-year-old Mayan calendar ended on December 21, 2012. In that sermon, I recounted a story about me and my wife, Jakki. We'd had a brief conversation the week before about what *we* would do if the world was ending tomorrow. Jakki said she would try to gather together the people she loves most and spend time with them. I said I wouldn't do anything different, because I would *never* believe it. We laughed, but we were both serious, and our answers reflect our personality differences. But if we put those two answers together, they are a commentary on the paradox of the life of faith: We should live every day as if it is our last, *and* we should live every day as if we will live forever.

Needless to say, despite the dire Mayan calendar predictions, there was no cataclysm when the Mayan calendar ended. But the thing is, tragedies happen every day, and the climate crisis is coming. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus describes the hard times ahead, but he says to stay calm, because new things are being born. God's kingdom is coming. We can find our way through tragedies small and large by being part of a church that was built upon the *resurrection* of the one who was crucified.

Today's reading from the Letter to the Hebrews tells us that, through Christ's sacrifice, we are both sanctified and perfected. In this condition, the author says:

. . . let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of *faith*, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our *hope* without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to *love* and *good deeds*, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.⁵

In other words, have faith, hope, love, and charity. Every day is an end *and* a beginning; every day brings tragedy *and* glory. Every day, have faith, hope, love and charity. Live every day as if it is your last, *and* live every day as if you will live forever.

Notes

¹ Tisha B'Av, which is literally the ninth day (Tisha) of the month of Av.

² Mark 13:2 NRSV.

³ Private email to webmaster@stthomasnewhaven.org, May 22, 2021. Though I was reluctant to read the full text during worship, I offer it here: "I am so happy, for myself, that your church emphasizes a celebration of homosexuality. Just think, I really dig the Bible but. . . as youse think you know best, bugging should be something y'all all shout out loud continuously! So, I shall pass on joining y'all as I'm looking to join God in eternity through Jesus, our Lord. There ain't gonna be Vaseline in heaven. Have a splendid fellowship." I have not included the sender's name, because this text will be posted online.

⁴ Private email to webmaster@stthomasnewhaven.org, November 12, 2021. The full text is: "I am appalled and yes, disgusted, to see a prominently displayed Black Lives Matter banner displayed at your church. How you can promote an organization that promotes hatred, violence and division is beyond me. Just today the BLM leader in NYC threatened fire, violence and mayhem if the newly elected mayor of New York did not follow his beliefs. / I was raised a Protestant and your behavior sickens me. I will be looking for another church to worship that has teachings as far from your teachings as possible. / We need our religious organizations to unite not divide." I have not included the sender's name, because this text will be posted online.

⁵ Hebrews 10:22-25.