

Proper 28B 2021 Sermon

Mark 13:1-8

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 kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.”

“Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” the disciple exclaimed. “Then Jesus said, ‘Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.’”

Scholars tell us that it had taken 10,000 men ten years just to build the *retaining* walls around the Temple Mount, the huge platform on which the Jewish Temple was built. Even today, 2000 years *after* it was built, the Temple Mount in Jerusalem is still the largest man-made platform in the world, taking up the space of 24 football fields. Regarding the Temple itself, 1st-Century historian Josephus wrote: “Viewed from without, the [Temple] had everything that could amaze either mind or eyes. Overlaid all round with stout plates of gold, the first rays of the sun reflected so fierce a blaze of fire that those who endeavored to look at it were forced to turn away as if they had looked straight at the sun...”¹ Such was the magnificent Jewish Temple.

But in the year 70 A.D., around the time that Mark was writing his Gospel, the Romans utterly destroyed the Temple and crushed a Jewish revolt. Today, not one stone is left of Herod’s magnificent Temple – just as Jesus had predicted.

On September 11, 2001, two commercial passenger airliners flew into the twin towers of the World Trade Center, and the unimaginable became all too real. Almost 3,000 people were killed. Air traffic came to a halt. The stock market plunged, businesses failed, and Americans felt vulnerable as never before in modern history. If ever it could be said that **we** experienced apocalyptic times, similar in impact (though not in details) to the apocalyptic events described in the 13th chapter of Mark’s Gospel, it was on 9/11/2001.

And, with just a little reflection, we could mention other events in our relatively recent lives that also shook the foundations beneath us. On a Global scale, there have been numerous wars, with tremendous loss of life; there was the AIDS epidemic of the early 1980’s and the Y2K computer scare near the end of the millennium. In the United States, there were the bankruptcies of Lehman Brothers and General Motors and the government bailouts of financial institutions during the Great Recession of 2008 – actions which would have been unimaginable just a decade before. And, of course, there is the current pandemic, unlike anything any of us has experienced

in our lifetime. It has already killed more than 5 million people in the world, including 108 of our fellow residents of Fremont County; and the count keeps rising. Venerable old businesses have gone bankrupt in the wake of the pandemic: Neiman Marcus, J.C. Penny, Brooks Brothers, Hertz Rental Cars, and many more.

Other, more personal, events can also shake our lives to their foundations: the sudden death of a family member; a divorce; the loss of a home to flooding or fire; the sudden loss of a job – you can likely name several events in your own life when the foundations shook beneath you.

At such times, one thing becomes very clear: In light of great tragedies, those passing things in which we have placed our trust, or in which we have invested a great deal of our energy, even our *identity* – be it wealth, ego, political parties, or whatever – these things no longer seem so important or consequential. Divisions between Democrats and Republicans all but disappeared in the days following 9/11. We were no longer members of this or that political party; we were Americans. We were fellow human beings. We **all** wore t-shirts, or put stickers on our cars, which said, “I [heart] New York.”

The question we must ask is: Why does this strong sense of commonality fade over time? Why didn’t the intense sense of solidarity amongst us following 9/11 persist?

In the first few months of the current pandemic – in March, April, May of 2020 – there were daily stories in the news about Americans helping one another, sacrificing for one another, with no regard to political party. Frontline workers – nurses, doctors, grocery workers – were applauded in the streets, on television, and in print. How did we ever devolve from that sense of “we’re all in this together” into our present state of extreme divisiveness – often **caused** by our differing views on the very pandemic that *united* us at its beginning? In these United States of America, we seem to have *forgotten* the lessons of September 11, 2001 and the beginning months of the current pandemic, when we put our political divisiveness aside in light of the far greater unity which we share as fellow Americans and fellow human beings, all children of One God.

After the Presidential election of 1952, Adlai Stevenson, the loser of that election, said in his concession speech: “It is traditionally American to fight hard before an election. It is equally traditional to close ranks as soon as the people have spoken. That which unites us as American citizens is far greater than that which divides us as political parties. I urge you all to give to Gen. Eisenhower the support he will need to carry out the great tasks that lie before him. I pledge him [my support]. We vote as many. But we pray as one.”² (unquote)

“That which unites us as American citizens is far greater than that which divides us as political parties.” Do we still believe that?

Fr. John Shea offers some insight into a human dynamic that is in play during times when the ground seems to have been pulled out from under us. He says that times like 9/11, when our foundations are shaken, are like the times when “the trapeze artist has let go of one bar and has not yet grabbed the next bar. It is midair living. The identity we had is gone and the identity we *will* have has not arrived... [S]piritual teachers suggest that the in-between time is an opportunity

to remember that we are always more than what is happening to us. We are not only *immersed* in transition, we **transcend** it. Our soul is not only related to the changing temporal order but to the **unchanging eternal** order.”³ (unquote) Is that not what Adlai Stevenson was saying when he stated, in his concession speech, “We vote as many. But we pray as one.”?

Yes, my friends, we *are* related to the changing temporal order, to all the events that happen to us each day. But we are also, and more *profoundly*, related to the **unchanging eternal** order, *fundamentally* related to each other, with **spiritual** ties *far* more profound than political ties could ever be. During times like 9/11 and the beginning of this pandemic, when we have lost our grip on one bar and have yet to grasp another – during times when we live in midair – we seem to *sense* that elemental spiritual reality and connection more keenly and acutely, to know the reality of our togetherness with far greater clarity – at least for a while.

“When we lead a stable life...,” Fr. Shea writes, “this spiritual truth often eludes us. When disruption occurs—and we either choose or are forced to change—an invitation emerges in the middle of the transition. Since we are between earthly stabilities, we may just shift awareness to our **heavenly** connection. In doing this, we begin to develop our spiritual potential.

“...For those of us *addicted* to our descriptive selves [I am conservative, I am liberal, etc.], moving to the *transcendent* self seems like a fallback position. When we cannot have what we *really* want [wealth, control, esteem, or ‘being right’ and winning against our opponents; when we can’t have *these* things], we reluctantly stand on the ground **God** provides in the turmoil of sea change. But once we have negotiated a new set of earthly stabilities, we quickly forget the sense of transcendence that sustained us in the midst of change.

“...We remember the spiritual when we need it and we forget it when we don’t.”³ [Repeat]

My friends, I believe this is why we need to practice some regular form of “detachment” from our “descriptive selves” – detachment from “I am an American, I am the outward identity which I show to the world, I am a member of this or that political party,” etc. Such detachment from our descriptive selves puts us, at least for the moment, in that midair space; or even, at times, stands us on the ground **God** provides. Some form of regular prayer or spiritual practice that detaches us from our ego can move us to that midair, transformative space without having some tragedy *force* us there.

A few years ago, Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon and one of the 2 or 3 richest men in the world, said in a statement that went viral, “Amazon is not too big to fail ... In fact, I predict one day Amazon *will* fail. Amazon will go bankrupt. If you look at large companies, their lifespans tend to be 30-plus years, not a hundred-plus years.”⁴ 30-plus years, not a hundred-plus years.

Jeff Bezos founded Amazon in 1994; the company will be 30 years old in just 3 years. Although it seems unthinkable today, by Bezos’ own reckoning, it is possible that, in the next few years, Amazon will fail; and one of the richest persons on earth may find himself not in his own space capsule in orbit, but in midair.

AMEN

1 *The Jewish War*, p. 304

2 <https://www.wnyc.org/story/adlai-stevenson-conceding-address/>

3 Quotes from John Shea are from John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, pp. 270-274

4. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/richardkestenbaum/2018/11/16/amazon-is-not-too-big-to-fail-bezos/?sh=760250e31626>