

November 15, 2015
Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost

"And the Stones Come Tumbling Down"
By Mary Anne Biggs

Hebrews 10:11-18 ~ Mark 13:1-8

When I was in high school days, a good friend of mine tried to talk me into taking a shop class with her. Her boyfriend was going to be in the class and she didn't want to be the only girl. Well, my boyfriend wasn't going to be in the class so I politely declined.

One day, I missed my friend at lunch, so I asked if anyone had seen her. The report came back that she suffered an accident while using the shop table saw, and had been taken to the hospital. I visited her there later that day, and her hand was bandaged tightly from fingers to elbow. She told me that she had not ensured that all the safety guards were in place, and a very large splinter of wood had broken free and speared her forearm. That seemed gruesome enough, but then her dad told me that only the quick action of the instructor to stop the saw had prevented the splinter from being grabbed by the spinning blade and pulling my friend's arm into it.

That story has been for me a lesson. First and foremost, never even think about using a table saw! But it has also said something to me about ministry. There are many tools that we use in the ministry that we share, and some of those tools are very powerful. Our church facility is one such tool for ministry ... it has been provided us by God ... and by the faithfulness of those who have gone before us ... but if we had not learned and remembered how to use it wisely and well, it could have become a danger to us. It could have become an *idol* ... something to which we give our loyalty, our efforts and our resources for its own sake. But we have not done that ... we *have* used this facility wisely and well ... we house AA, NA, and Daybreak here ... along with the Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts and exercise and yoga classes and TED talks and Bridge and watercolor groups ... we are good and faithful stewards of what we have been given.

But I think that the conversations between Jesus and the disciples as they tour the grounds of the Temple are an example of how things that are meant to serve God and God's people can become distorted and ultimately dangerous spiritually. The Temple was meant to be a symbol and yet more than that ... it was the *sign* of God's presence among the people ... a massive token of God's activity to bless and to strengthen ... an intersection of things divine and things human. Yet the very beauty ... the very immensity ... the very profundity of the Temple served only to make it something ultimately dangerous. The prophets long before Jesus declared to the people that they should not take for granted the fact that they ... among all the nations ... could say that the Lord of heaven and earth was in their midst ... because such a fact could turn on Israel as well. Like the table saw that nearly maimed my friend, Israel's complacency and arrogance about the Temple could be deadly.

But this is not just a temptation or a danger for Israel long ago, or to the dazzled disciples trotting along after Jesus, awed by the large stones of the Temple. We too must guard against being growing complacent or getting distracted by the tools of our ministry. Membership numbers, programs, innovation ... stewardship campaigns, “transformative” preaching, Christmas pageants ... Christian education, moving worship ... there is no end to the large stones that we seek to erect. Are our large stones meant to draw the attention and wonder of onlookers? Are our large stones put in place to attract potential members? Are our large stones even constructed so as to secure the dedication and continued wonder of our own flock? Our faith, our religious life, our churches are not free from the want for prestige ... for desire of greatness and grandness ... for a yearning for a majesty beyond comparison. Why is that? Is it fear? Is it insecurity? Is it a belief that church is really just one big competition? Is it a sense that God really doesn't mean what God says? That God doesn't really keep God's promises? All of our congregational "stuff," whether the building itself and its furnishings ... our congregational structures and leadership processes ... or anything that we purchase or plan are simply means to another end ... so that someone ... some man ... some woman ... some child might be served by us and come to know Christ.

But when we are caught by the finery of our surroundings ... when we are dazzled by the sheer size and importance of the tools we have been given for ministry ... we still have in our midst the *sign* of God's presence among us. We have the few cups of water in the baptismal font ... the loaf of bread and grape juice sitting on the communion table ... the neighbor sitting next to you. Jesus called upon the disciples to *not* be dazzled ... but to discern God at work in the world ... to be aware of the ways in which God is at work in our lives ... our worlds ... our history ... our future. God is at work here, among us. If you were to ask me if God is at work in the great and powerful of the world I would grudgingly have to yes, because I know that God is at work in everyone ... even those who make political decisions that I'm not particularly fond of. But I would have no hesitation in giving you an "absolutely yes" if you asked me if God was at work among those that we tend not to notice ... among the quiet and inconspicuous ... among the little and the left out ... among the things of this world that are deemed of little importance. The things we build, no matter how grand, will perish ... the things God builds, no matter how small, will endure, even to the end of the age.

This passage in Mark has an apocalyptic ring to it doesn't it? I have to admit that I'm not that big a fan of the apocalyptic texts. Because many ... in fact way too many! ... Christians have come to believe that the question asked by Peter, James, John, and Andrew, is *the* central question of the Christian faith ... “When will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to happen?”

When will the stones come tumbling down? That's what the apostles want to know after Jesus' comment about the building blocks of the Jewish temple (Mark 13:4). The apostles probably thought that the destruction of the temple would mean the end of their world. Jesus wants to make one thing perfectly clear. When these things happen, it is *not* the end of the world (Mark 13:7). Sadly many Christians believe that real life begins in the next. Jesus believed that real life is now ... and needs transformation ... not termination. Stones have been tumbling for centuries. Most recently stones have been plummeting in the streets of Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria. This is happening also in the private lives of people who lose jobs, get divorced, and in

the lives of children living homeless on our city streets. Jesus says that when these things happen we are not to be deceived. The end is not yet. These are only birth pangs ... labor pains (Mark 13:8). When there are labor pains we know that new life is near. Rather than hankering for escape into the afterlife, Jesus calls for us to give birth. How do we know what God wants us to do? Well, we learn from the Bible that God does not lure us into abundant life by urging us to play it safe. Hints of God's guidance may be found in dark places, fearful dreams. In all this talk about stones falling Jesus is pointing out the dark places. It sure seems like chaos, but that is how stars are made.

Jesus also tells them, "When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed..." Wars and rumors of wars have abounded in my lifetime. Cuba, Vietnam, the Cold War, Iraq twice, Iran, Afghanistan ... I've lived through these, rumors and wars. Now it's Syria ... a war and an onslaught of rumors ... a flood of refugees and destruction ... undeniable images of treasured buildings lying in rubble ... echoes of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., when all those buildings that the disciples admired became rubble.

Yes, it has been conventional wisdom to understand Jesus' predictive words about terrible times as pointing to the end of the world ... and the end of history. But what if Jesus meant something else?

What if Jesus meant us to understand that empires and eras ... temples and traditions ... all rise and fall, and that idols come and go? That the familiar, the treasured, and the dear, do end, but without shattering the nature of creation or the reign of God? What if Jesus meant us to understand that God is beyond all that ... and the fullness of time is both within these times and beyond these times? What if Jesus meant us to understand that the mammoth and magnificent achievements of empires cannot begin to represent what is really eternal? What if Jesus is pointing to the power of *beginning again* as the real story of God ... whose creation is not fixed but endlessly evolving?

America is a creation of immigrants who arrived here when the life they had known was shattered, by war, by despotism, by shifting political winds, by rising tides of hatred. They arrived... survivors of an old world now in rubble who would build a new world ... using their scars to posit possibility that does not lead to the old death. From every part of this world they have come, bringing remembered food, songs, prayers, customs, comforts, worries. The survivors of more horrors than I can name arrived to become new people in a new world. They lived through nations rising against nation, and kingdom against kingdom ... they lived through earthquakes in various places and famines. They've seen all this come to pass, and how through it all, the world has been reborn.

It takes incredible courage – even more than courage, it takes faith – to begin life again. Ask the wounded vets whose shattered bodies endure unceasing pain. Ask middle-aged Americans who lost good jobs nine years ago in the recession, and haven't earned a decent living since. Ask all the families who have someone in prison now. Ask the children in the foster-care system. Ask people struggling with addiction. Ask all those who lost homes in the west coast fires this year, or in the Texas floods. But we are called to have the courage not to give in to cynicism or despair. We are called to search out new possibilities for the future ... wonderful life, which is

never made of stone, but is born of the power of life itself to dream dreams and see visions of God's world. Jesus' eye never wavered from this vision ... not the end, but the *fullness of time*.

We profess that we want to know when so that we can be prepared ... so that we can be ready. But we are invited to be ready *all* the time. We are not called simply to live our lives with no thought of God or neighbor ... we are not called to be keenly looking for the sign of God's imminent coming so that we can clean up our act. Rather, we are called to live *always* anticipating the activity of God.

Not in a state of anxiety, let's be clear, minding our Ps and Qs in fear that we'll fail some divine behavior test. No, we are called to live in joy and confidence. Joy in the knowledge that God has revealed God's grace, mercy and goodness to us and all the world in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Knowing God's love in Christ, that is, we are called joyfully to share that love with others. And confidence from trusting the promise ... that the God who raised Jesus from the dead will also raise us ... restoring the world to its intended glory.

In time. In God's time. We would like to know when that is. But that is not our calling. We are called to live *now* ... allowing the promises of God about the future to infuse our every present moment. Because when you live looking for the activity of God here and now, you begin to see it ... in an act of kindness of a friend ... in an opportunity to help another ... in the outreach ministry of a congregation ... in the chance to listen deeply to the hurt of another. God shows up in all kinds of places, working with us, for us, through us, and in us. You just have to look.

When will this happen? Now! What will be the sign? When you see people acting as Jesus did. Even here! Even now! Even us!

May we pray?

Gracious and loving God, we live in a culture that makes living something to be feared. Every day another threat or terror confronts us, whether near or far, and we wonder if there is any hope for the future. But in you we do not need to be afraid. While the world wonders what will happen next, we can live in the hope that you know and see all and are in control. Our future, our hope rests in you alone. It is you that gives us each new day as well as the courage to live in the moment you have provided. Make our lives a testimony of the future you have in store. Amen.