

Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost  
Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time  
I SAMUEL 1:4-20  
I SAMUEL 2:1-10  
HEBREWS 10:11-14, (15-18), 19-25  
MARK 13:1-8  
November 17, 2024

*Go Big or Go Home!*

**Bigger is better, or so they say, whoever they is! The nationally known injury law firm Morgan and Morgan says that size matters, putting their money where their mouth is by saturating the airwaves and by advertising on colossal billboards! Presidential campaigns in recent years have argued the merits regarding the size of various male body parts, large hands for example strangely considered a source of bragging, yes, pride, “worn” as a badge of honor, giving more than an edge for winning bizarrely irrelevant anatomical arguments! When we go fishing, quantity is always a good thing, especially ringing the dinner bell when the pressure of a fish fry is mounting, but it is the size of a fish that gets the most attention.** In one of the resurrection stories found toward the end of the Gospel of John (21:11), an actual count of a catch of 153 large fish is noted by the meticulous Johannine writer. As you know anglers, fisherwomen, and fishermen, are literalists about their catch except when they are not, a certain level of exaggeration always expected, perhaps an acceptable form of lying. Wow, of course the size and numbers of these fish described in John naturally reached biblical proportions. We would not expect less! **Go big or go home!**

**In our Witness from the Gospels today we read an interesting story indeed! As was their custom, a practice expected of all Jews, Jesus and his disciples had made their typical, the usual, visit to the temple in Jerusalem. As they were coming out of the great center of worship, the pride of Zion, emerging into the bright light of day, there was nothing unusual to see, nothing different about the landscape, except! How many times in our lives have we passed something so familiar, so obvious, so matter of fact, that we fail to see it. And then all at once, suddenly, as if out of nowhere, in a random moment of a day that is most ordinary, occurring as we go about our daily routine, we have an epiphany, we notice something, we see something that is staring right back at us, smacking us squarely in the face as we look intently with a curious glint at an object we have never noticed before, our now myopic gaze, for some unbeknownst reason not clouded, not distracted or distorted by any and every other thing. We wonder how we ever missed it in the first place!?! As Jesus and his merry band of twelve take leave of the temple, one of the disciples experiences that illuminating kind of aha moment, noticing, as if for the first time, how huge the surrounding buildings were, impressed as to how massive was the immensity of the structures forming the temple complex. Jaw dropping, many of these ginormous stones are still standing strong today as a part of the western side of the temple remains now known as the wailing wall. It is as if this disciple had never noticed something, that had been there for years because he had not taken notice, that**

is, until he was suddenly awestruck by the enormity and the splendor of the towering edifice that was as obvious as the nose on his face. What an impression these gigantic stones surely must have made on this now observant apostle. The stones, the buildings, the temple complex, had been there the whole time, this monument to God planted right there in its place all along, but only now had become an object coming clearly into focus, this sacred space offering a perspective never considered despite its imposing location carefully chosen at the top of the Mount of Olives, a breathtaking vista. Wow, what a view! My hunch is, sermon spoiler alert, that so much of life is like that, allowing us, perhaps urging us, to discover possibilities, all the potential that is just waiting around the next bend, appearing just around the next corner to add spice to all our adventuresome journeys. We just never know!

So, in the crucible of the moment, one of the aforementioned but unnamed disciples cried out for all to hear, exclaiming with an uncontained, unbridled, excitement, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” PHEME PERKINS, commenting on this text, notes, “Despite Jesus’ warnings not to be taken in by appearances of wealth, the disciples are awed by the massive Herodian masonry and the extensive buildings that were part of the Temple complex.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus was not impressed, not moved in the least, dismissing this comment as an obvious overreaction, making much ado about nothing! One person’s fascinating discovery, their mesmerizing revelation, is another person’s ho-hum, so what, who cares! R. Alan Culpepper observes that “The Mount of Olives offered a vantage point from which Jesus and the disciples could view the temple and the city of Jerusalem, and Mark notes that it lies ‘opposite the temple.’”<sup>2</sup> “Located on the highest point in Jerusalem, it dazzled visitors and pilgrims as they approached the ancient city.”<sup>3</sup> The historian Josephus records that “the Temple was built of hard, white stones, each of which was about 25 cubits in length, 8 in height and 12 in width,”<sup>4</sup> in other words, really big! Culpepper adds, “It would have been the typical reaction of visitors to Jerusalem to marvel at the construction of the temple . . . one of the architectural wonders of the ancient world . . .”<sup>5</sup> Supposedly, the temple was gilded with so much gold adorning its captivating exterior, covering a large portion of the façade of the building, that, according to legend, the brightness made by intense reflection was literally blinding to the eyes.

**And this is the point in the story where we have to do a little textual digging, as Jesus calmly responds, matter-of-factly, as if stating the obvious, as if benignly describing a fireworks display, that all this opulent magnificence will be destroyed, that the walls are gonna come a tumblin’ down, that not one stone will be left upon another, the very visible remnants of the western wall, however, proving a slight degree of hyperbole, just a bit of exaggeration.** Biblical scholars engage an ongoing debate, did Jesus actually say these words, the rabbi clearly seeing the writing on the wall, pun intended, and that destruction was imminent, the second of its kind (587 BCE; 70 CE) marring the ancient history of Israel, the man from Nazareth proving to be a clairvoyant soothsayer, a psychic accurately predicting the future? Or were these words, as were many, if not most, of the sayings

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<sup>1</sup>PHEME PERKINS, “Mark,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Leander E. Keck, ed., (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 685.

<sup>2</sup>R. Alan Culpepper, “Mark”, in *Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary*, (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 2007), 447.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 446.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

attributed to Jesus, put in his mouth by the early Church, creatively crafted by the writers who composed the Gospels? As we know, each of these four depictions of the life of Jesus were written long after the compilation of the rest of the Christian scriptures, what we traditionally call the New Testament. Perhaps the truth in this debate lies somewhere in the middle, a little bit of both. After all, during Jesus' lifetime, the ill winds of dreaded change were galvanizing, nasty hostilities gathering forces, an ominous feeling, a sense, a sense of fear and dread, that, at some point in the near future, that Rome, the evil and oppressive occupier, was going to crack down on Jerusalem. **Eventually, Rome would come down hard on the Jews, demanding that they bend a knee, bowing to Caesar, their liege, a man regarded as "Son of God" according to legendary Roman folklore, allegiance that was blasphemy to both traditional Jews and the newbie followers of Jesus. Destruction was total!** The wrath of dictatorial imperialism especially targeted the zealots, crushing the will of any who were perceived and those who were actually participating in the resistance movement, showing that the empire would indeed strike back, Star Wars image inserted here. Yes, the Caesar in power, Titus by name, would squash any uprising, both real and imagined hints of insurrection, sedition never taking root, not a chance of becoming even the remotest possibility. After all, it is this fear, this paranoia, that gave rise to an unjust cause, though empirical evidence was swirling around this troubled powder keg. Perhaps these were some spies thrown in the mix for good measure, a cornucopia of conspiracy theories, leading toward a final showdown with Jesus being accused of said crimes, arrested, convicted, and crucified, executed as a common criminal, a presumed insurrectionist believed to be leading a peasant revolt. Obviously, the rabbi had gained fame and a following large enough to garner unwanted, if not unmerited, attention, triggering accusations and all the subsequent that unfortunately spawned the hysteria of irrational, perhaps totally rational, reactionary violence perpetrated by the Romans against the humble rabbi, the commoner from Nazareth! **Even Jesus, this lover of peace, this peacemaker, had become an enemy of the state, ironic to more than a slight degree. Now that we have some context, some backstory, we can get on with a sermon!**

**Major pivot here! All this talk in the Gospel of Mark about big buildings got me to thinking about all things big, stretching the metaphor in these intended Markan words far beyond the breaking point this morning. This being the Sunday of all things Stewardship, as in *A Celebration of Stewardship*, I honestly began to think about all the big things that are happening, that you make happen, here at First Congregational United Church of Christ, yes, the big things that all of us together are doing as a local missional church, the beloved faith community gathered right here and right now for such a time, and such a place, as this. Whenever pastoral clergy types get together, one of the inevitable questions asked, among the polite introductions and small talk, is "How big is your church?" After all, as I said earlier, size matters, egos are on the line, you are known by the size of your steeple. Throughout my career I have intentionally chosen to be the pastor of smaller congregations because I love the intimacy, the kinds of relationships that you can only build when you really get to personally know someone. And one bit of wisdom I have learned through these years of pastoral ministry, a reminder that came home to roost once again this past week, is that I value relationships more than I value being right and making others wrong, as challenging, as difficult, as living that standard often can be! Years ago, a clergy friend helped me formulate the perfect response to the question, "How big is your church?" Simply return the question with a question, "Do you mean in numbers or influence?" Wow! The influence, the impact, that this church is**

making in the lives of people everywhere, in the lives of this community, people we see and know personally, and unknown numbers of individuals living beyond our city, our county, and even our state borders, can only be compared to that wide-eyed disciple who finally, after years of neglect, perhaps blinded by the obvious, noticed, as if for the first time, those massive stones on those huge buildings that comprised the temple complex.

We are known by our works and our works are many, sometimes almost too many, sometimes seemingly more than we can manage and satisfactorily sustain. After all, too much of a good thing can be too much! We cannot bite off more than we can chew, doing so causing a bad case of institutional indigestion! Even so, more than too many is always better than too little, our lofty goals always right in front of us, challenging us, but achievable in every way imaginable. We strive to do big things here in this special place, among this special people, because the members of this church are at our core, deep in our spirits, at the depth of our souls, devotedly, unapologetically, hospitably welcoming and inclusive, characterized by big hearts and open minds, using whatever pleasing adjectives describing our theological leanings makes you happy. We are driven by, fueled by, a passion for social justice in its many forms, yearning to fulfill the call of the prophet Micah that we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. Jesus would not only echo, but would fulfill Micah's exhortation in his life and ministry, in his preaching and teaching, his mission the very thing we seek to emulate as his ardent, passionate, followers. **This is who we are! This is what we are!** While we seek to grow from within, bettering ourselves as a corporate body, becoming stronger as a congregation, systemically healthier as a family system, bound by ties that build unity and harmony, a delightful oneness, with every passing day, this is a people who are always looking beyond these walls, expanding this ever widening circle, stretching and transcending all boundaries, sensitive and attentive to the needs of the wider community, giving generously of time, talent, and tithes, an ancient word describing financial and other tangible commitments. **Aside from our caring and compassionate, our loving, embrace of all people, our version of "extravagant welcome", three words aptly describe who and what we are, energy, enthusiasm, and excitement, yes filling us with overflowing grace, mercy, and peace.** I often say that my job as pastor, with all the gifts and flaws I may bring to the ecclesial equation, is to stay out of the way as much as possible and not mess up a good thing. And finding myself in that place is a wonderful place to be! Trust me, I have done a lot of cleanup on the proverbial aisle twelve during my career.

And speaking of all things church and churchly as we ponder our ecclesial stewardship this morning, Jonathan Tran, who teaches theological ethics at Baylor University, in a provocative article titled "Keep Swinging for the Fences", makes some salient comments about the state of the Church in this changing time. Listen to some of his comments! He laments that "People keep pooh-poohing the church, but I think it's the best thing since sliced bread. People talk about the church with this great sense of disappointment, as if it has dropped the ball in some unforgivable way. But if you're disappointed, what were you expecting? The church is made up of people, people doing their best to be together than they would on their own. Sometimes it works. Often it doesn't. When it works, no one does it better." (Di I detect a Carly Simon image here?) "When it doesn't, when the church fails to do what it says, the results are as bad as you'd expect when people swing for the fences."

“We are told that people are leaving the church in droves. Pews are empty, denominations are dying. We hear more about exvangelicals and nones than we do about converts and the catechized. People no longer find community in church, and so why waste your time—better to keep Sundays free for football.” (Bad metaphor; we enjoy both!) “Young people feel called to anything and everything but church.” (That is very true; there is a real clergy shortage!) “Old people talk fondly about what church used to be, not what it is.” (I have not noticed that sad phenomenon here!) “And the church’s awful history of scandal and abuse certainly doesn’t help.”

I want to say, if people want to leave the church, let them go. If they think they’ve found greener pastures, why keep them from them? They will have left the church for what the church should have been. And if they want to leave because they lack hope, we’ve already lost them. What we in the church can’t do is change what we are called to do in order to keep people from leaving. The goal of the church has never been getting people to stay; it’s getting people to come. We believe the best way to get people to come is by being who we are called to be, holding fast to the hope that if we do, they will come.”

“And to all of you who have not found something else—who have stayed, sticking it out and believing hope against hope that the church can be the church—I want to say, keep doing your thing. This hardly means being perfect, and it might even mean being honest with folks that, while perfection is the goal, it’s hardly the point.” “After all, if everyone leaves, who’s gonna swing for the fences?”

Tran concludes his article by declaring, “We can keep pooh-poohing the church and its all-too-human failures. But we also have to admit that the church swinging for the fences is a sight to behold. When it does that, when it leans into God’s promise to make the church an emblem of creation redeemed, of all things made new, we catch a glimpse of the eternal. For its misses,” (I would add, many as there are) “we can quit and give up on the church, but that feels to me like giving up the game. I’d rather keep swinging. I hope you will too.” Very articulate! Nicely done! Well said!

**Today we celebrate our Stewardship! We could either go off script and talk about all that we have and all that we need, beautiful imagery foreshadowing Thanksgiving, the beginning of this magical season accentuating generosity, celebrating with gratitude our abundance, or we could stick with the literal rendering explicit in our reading from the Gospel and talk about the end of the world and how everything is supposedly going to be destroyed, marking a catastrophic end time, doomsday, scenario. Oh, what a joy that will be! Yippee! Frankly, in all honesty, I think we have had enough of that negative thinking, our minds cluttered to the breaking point, overwhelmed with emotional jetlag, way too much baggage! I make that observation because I think, that as painful as some stewardship emphases, campaigns, drives, or what-have-yous, can be, that you would much rather talk about support for our blessed congregational endeavors far more than you would like to ponder a violent end of the world. Just a hunch!** Yes, perspective is a wonderful thing. By the way, I think all the hysterical fear mongering predicting end of the world nonsense as described in the Bible is way overrated and totally misinterpreted. Jesus is not coming back with a vengeance, taking out his anger while taking names, checking his list, and checking it twice, you know, like the bearded one. There, I have covered the essence of our Gospel reading for today in a nutshell, emphasis on nuts.

Mike Huckabee, are you listening? Our nominee to be the new ambassador to Israel is a certifiable tone-deaf, nutjob, rapture kook! Check him and it out! If there is an apocalypse, some form of an Armageddon, these graphically horrific atrocities will be of our own making, our unfortunate demise the tragic result of the warring madness caused by our failure to fully evolve as human beings, our inability to live as a global village, valuing all humanity and all the relationships that come from being fully human. Our destruction, if there ever is one, cannot be blamed on a mythologically pathological bloodthirsty deity in need of judgmental vindication, obsessed with an insatiable thirst, a voracious appetite, for retributive justice. That kind of God does not exist but is portrayed only as a sick fantasy, as a figment of a perverse imagination, a demonic mirage that is nothing more than a malevolent, maniacal, mythological monster! Take heart, have no fear, a loving God, a God of grace and not guilt, will not destroy a creation that the Holy One not only called good at conception and birth, but very good, doomsday soothsayers be damned.

**What a grand opportunity we have before us each and every day, what a great responsibility with which we have been blessed to have as our calling, unique as is every call to serve, our work in the world, a calling that has become our mantra, an essential, most important, part of our lives, individually and corporately, because God knows our capacity, our capability, our heart and our hope. God has richly entrusted to us a wealth of servanthood, invested so much in us, so many treasures in earthen vessels, more than we could ever count. We are told in the Gospels that unto whom much is given, much will be required, and we are meeting that high calling with every ministry we take, with every missional step we make. The challenge to conducting any manner of Stewardship awareness, along with a sermon specifically devoted to this necessary but sometimes annoying, somewhat invasive, topic, is knowing, and thus acknowledging, the commitment that already has been proven by the pudding of this congregation, proof in our faith that is shown by our works, a wonderful and always necessary intersection, faith works, thank you Paul and James. The fruits of our labor are continuously being revealed, over and over and over again, fully manifested and proudly put on display for all to see, for everyone we meet and imagine to experience, joyful toiling in this vineyard, budding and blossoming in our many good deeds, gloriously carried forth each and every day by the wonderfully gracious and loving folks gathered as a fellowship divine right here and right now as the First Congregational United Church of Christ, who, guided by the still speaking Spirit of God, led by wisdom, Sophia the great source of the universe and the longing of our hearts, make this church this church, one blessed congregant at a time. In the words of Jonathan Tran, keep swinging for the fences! Go big or go home!**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and calls forth from us our best stewardship, sharing generously from all that has been entrusted in our care! Amen and amen!**