



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: November 15, 2009

When Our World Collapses, Robert B. Culp

Mark 13:1-8

I have to confess that I really didn't want to preach on this text from Mark, especially on a day when we are receiving new members. Of course, when I zeroed in on this passage during the summer as the lectionary reading I would use for this morning's sermon, I didn't realize that today we would be welcoming new members into our church family; and I sure hope that such a text will not frighten them away! Nor frighten any of you, for that matter, into wondering what on earth is Bob thinking by preaching on such a passage!

Truth be told, such passages as we find in Mark this morning are not favorites of mine. In fact, for many years I have had a visceral aversion to such apocalyptic texts in scripture, and in my preaching I have generally avoided them like the plague ... for various reasons:

- * I find such wild metaphors and violent images unsettling and embarrassing in a post-modern world, more appropriate for a Hollywood film than for the edification and deepening of our faith;
- * Such texts have been abused in the hands of too many hell-fire-and-brimstone preachers, as they have sought to engender fear and trembling in the lives of their listeners, manipulating them into emotional conversions that deep-down are shallow and are hardly rooted in love, much less gratitude;
- * These passages have been misinterpreted in ways that have yielded specific dates or conditions surrounding the end of the world, all of them wrong, but which have made millions for certain purveyors of a theology that does violence to the integrity and purpose of scripture;
- * Such visions cause many to focus only upon the future, without any regard to the pressing needs of the present, seducing folk into becoming so heavenly-minded that they end up being no earthly good at all.

But perhaps the real reason I struggle with such an apocalyptic text as the one before us is because it pushes upon us the question of what we are to do when the world does fall in upon us, and the walls come tumbling down.

I think that one of the most difficult tasks that is mine as a minister is when I am called to be with people at those times when their lives are falling apart and the world is crashing in upon them, and to do so as a witness to the presence of God. For as often as not, as I listen to their questions and feel the pain of their struggles, I find myself asking pretty much the same questions that are rumbling about deep inside them – “Why is this happening? Why has this tragedy come to me? Where is God amidst my difficulties?” Without any question, it is not easy for me to find my way to the meaning of the human

condition when it seems that the world is coming to an end, and God does not seem mindful of our suffering.

You know, sometimes the world makes fun of us people of faith, veritably mocking our willingness to hang on to our flimsy, old-fashioned beliefs and lifestyles when other realities – “that might makes right, that life makes only the sense you give it, that money can get you what you really need” – when these realities seem to make more sense to increasing numbers of people. Much like Job whom we encountered a few weeks ago, when our world is collapsing and matters don’t go our way, and when the God we thought we had safely boxed in seems no longer to be there, we struggle with our suspicion that God does not really care about us. At such times, the walls of our faith are being broken down by our doubts, as the world and our anxious experience of it hammers away at the stones.

Alluding to our scripture passage from Mark, one commentator has observed that “many of us live with a temple we have built for God that boxes God in.” We build up an illusion that God will do our bidding, that God will make things go our way, that God will intervene in dramatic fashion to turn life in directions that favor our intentions ... but we know better.

For to live in that kind of temple of self-deception, with stones such as those for a foundation, is for us to live in a condemned building. Because you and I know all-too-well that life comes to all of us in ways we have not expected, shattering our illusions that we can have it our way and make it go as we intend. That kind of temple, Jesus is saying, is the one that has got to come down, even at the price of our disillusionment. And, amazingly, Jesus says this is “good news,” “the beginning of birth pangs,” as something new struggles to be born.

How can that be? What does Jesus mean? Well, a couple of observations. To begin with, when Jesus dramatically announces the complete destruction of the temple (which was the center of national life in Israel), he is revealing that present arrangements are not necessarily what God intends for the world.

Many times, we tend to think of God as working hard to create the world, to set things in motion as a divine watchmaker, and then sitting back in a uninvolved cosmic retirement. But what if God keeps creating? What if God intends to keep working in order to get the world that God wanted in the first place? What if not everything that happens in this world happens because God wants it to be that way, but that God means to take everything that happens ... even the bad things ... and somehow, wondrously, can turn them toward God’s intended good?

And ... what if the church is not where we come in order to get everything nailed down, eternal-looking and fixed, but where we come to live the questions and keep looking and working for God’s intended new heaven and new earth? Will Willimon notes that “Perhaps the church at its best fosters a sort of holy discontent in us, when we try to settle in and settle down and content ourselves with, ‘Well this is the best of all possible worlds; don’t look for anything better; this is it.’”

C.S. Lewis has written that most of us Christians are “too easily pleased.” There is somehow a tendency on our part to imbue human institutions and humanly-created situations with a kind of divine permanence, as if God created everything the way it now is. But passages like Mark’s this morning remind us that God isn’t done with us yet, nor is God done with the world.

And sometimes things can’t be made new until the old is destroyed. Sometimes there can’t be birth until there is death. I remember being told in one of my seminary classes that churches rarely grow and become renewed without painful adjustments and sometimes dying to what it was, and how it’s always been done, in order to become something new and stronger and better.

Back in the mid-70's, I served as an Assistant Minister in Florida in a large congregation that had many problems. One of the consultants called in by the church leaders told us, after some weeks of studies and interviews, that for there to be a renewed and revitalized church, the old church had to die ... old norms, old patterns, old attitudes that were blocking off a new day. He advised the governing board, "Something old has to die, in order for something new to be born."

Well, that sounded too radical, too disconcerting for the church's leadership, who felt they couldn't possibly say that to the church family. So the church continued to live much as they had done before, and no real renewal came. They were too enamored with the dazzling and award-winning "temple" they had built in 1961 to think of relinquishing it for the different temple God was offering them. They intentionally chose to ignore the birth pangs that were telling them of the new thing God was seeking to accomplish in their midst.

A strange question perhaps – is there anyone here this morning who has had to die in order to live? Does anyone in this room know what it's like to have your "temple" destroyed, only to have it replaced by something much better, much deeper? Has anyone's very bad news somehow ever become very good news?

A dear friend years ago once told me, "When my husband died at age 34 of colon cancer, I thought my life was over. I told God, 'I've got nothing to live for now. The home Gary and I were building together is empty, my world is destroyed, my hope is gone.' But, wonder of wonders," she reflected, "I didn't die. I went on, not with the same life, but with a new life. I wouldn't have chosen for my marriage to end, to be alone. Yet, that was the life I got, and I must say (as we began to discuss her upcoming wedding), it's all turned out for the best." She was a courageous soul who knew the move from bad news to good.

It is only human to cling tightly to what we know, to what we have. But maybe it's divine to give birth, sometimes painful birth, to a future that is new. Indeed, perhaps we come to church to learn how to look for God's hand and God's encouragement, even amidst news that we experience as bad ... learning how to expect God to work and to continue to create good news.

What are we to do when the world begins to fall in, when the things that matter fail to go our way, and the God we thought we had safely boxed in seems no longer to be there? There is really only one thing any of us can do, and that is to keep on moving, slug it out, putting one foot in front of the other as best we are able to do – sometimes even when we don't have the heart to do it, and trusting that somehow, by God's grace, we will get through it. It's the only way to overcome disillusionment in order to move into a new tomorrow.

What we must not do is to fall into the posture of a frightened passivity or despairing sense of paralysis. Bob Herbert remarked a few weeks ago in the New York Times that this kind of attitude among Americans in these days of all kinds of economic and geo-political crises is of great concern. He writes, "Where people once might have deluged their elected representatives with complaints, joined unions, resisted mass firings, confronted their employers with serious demands, marched for social justice, and created brand new civic organizations to fight for the things they believed in, the tendency now is to assume that there is little or nothing ordinary individuals can do about the conditions that plague them."

"This is so wrong," he writes. "It is the kind of thinking that would have stopped the civil rights movement in its tracks, that would have kept women in the kitchen or the steno pool, that would have prevented labor unions from forcing open the doors that led to the creation of a vast middle class."

He argues that with so many Americans believing that being an American today has become only a spectator sport, our nation's citizens must become fired up with a sense of renewed mission and the belief that our actions, in concert with others, can make a profound difference. And it can start with just a few small steps. After all, Rosa Parks helped transform a nation by simply refusing to budge from her seat. What might happen if we (as Americans, as a people of faith) were to speak up publicly about an important issue or convey to our elected leaders our thoughtful concerns and suggestions, or hosted a neighborhood get-together inviting those who are all alone, or helped arrange a meeting for those who have been downsized or have no jobs, or served as mentors at a troubled school?

It's risky, of course. We may find ourselves without our temple, even spiritually orphaned for a while. But eventually, as we keep on moving one step at a time, we come to a place that has expected our return for years. We live into the deep questions of our lives and times, leaning into them, leaning into the mystery that they are. And in the process, we come to discover the mystery of God, not a God of our making, but the God who is above all and through all and in all.

And yes, sometimes we will have faith, and sometimes we will lose faith, and then find it again ... which is to say that faith will find us again. But it will, at last, lead us to the kind of truth that will set us free. No more illusions. Just the goodness and the faithfulness of a God who will not leave us alone, but who will walk with us every step of the way.