

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.

“But in those days, after that suffering,

the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,

and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

There have been two times when I have stayed at a large hotel, gotten on the elevator, and in pushing the button for the floor my room was on I noticed that there was no button for the 13th floor. The buttons were numbered 10, 11, 12, 14, 15. There was no number 13. The reason for this is that some people consider the number 13 to be unlucky and they refuse to stay in a room on a 13th floor. To avoid dealing with this phobia, hotels figured out that they could avoid dealing with the concern by simply skipping the number 13. You can reason that what is called the 14th floor is actually the 13th floor, but that seems not to matter to those who have this phobia. Just skip number 13 and pretend it’s not there.

This is what I would like to do with the 13th chapter of Mark’s gospel. I’d like to just skip it and pretend it’s not there. Actually, that’s pretty much how I’ve always treated this chapter that talks about the destruction of the temple, the coming persecutions, the wars and rumors of wars, the sun being darkened, the coming of the Son of Man who gathers the elect, all of which I assume to be about the end of the world at some distant point in the future.

In addition to being uncomfortable with prophecies about the end of the world (truth be told, I kind of like this world and am not in a hurry for it to end), I find that I’m kind of embarrassed that Jesus talked about such things and then they didn’t take place. It’s passages like this 13th chapter which prompt some scholars to consider Jesus a failed apocalyptic visionary who was expecting the imminent end of the world. And if Jesus missed on this so badly, why should we put much stock in anything else he said?

Mark’s gospel flows just fine going from the end of chapter 12 to the beginning of chapter 14. So why not take out our scissors and cut out this embarrassing, problematic 13th chapter?

But before we do that, let’s stop for a moment and ponder why Mark included this section, as did Matthew and Luke in their gospels. These gospels were written 40-60 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. By that time, the generation Jesus said “would not pass away until all these things had taken place” had all died. The Christian community had resigned itself to realizing that the world was not going to end soon. Mark didn’t include everything Jesus said and did in his gospel. He made choices of what to include and what to leave out and how to arrange the material he used. So why would he include material that makes Jesus appear to be predicting the end of the world when that didn’t happen? Wouldn’t it have been better for Mark’s message if he had just left this section out?

So let's give Mark the benefit of the doubt. Let's assume that he included this section not only to faithfully record what Jesus had said, but because he understood Jesus' words in chapter 13 to be fulfilled in chapters 14, 15, and 16. If that's the case, then chapter 13 is not simply a side comment that is unnecessary for telling the story of Jesus, but is actually a key to understanding who Jesus is and the significance of his death on the cross and his resurrection.

A month ago we read the story of a wealthy man asking Jesus, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life." I shared with you that we 21st century members of Western culture misunderstand the term "eternal life" as the gospels use it. We assume eternal life means "going to heaven when I die." The Greek words we translate as "eternal life" (*Zoe aionios*) refer to one aspect of an ancient Jewish belief about how time was divided up. In this viewpoint, there are two "aions" (or eons): the "present age," (*ha-olam hazeh* in Hebrew), and the "age to come," (*ha-olam ha-ba*). The "age to come," many ancient Jews believed, would arrive one day to bring God's justice, peace, and healing to the world as it groaned and toiled with the "present age." It is another term for what Jesus calls "the kingdom of God." It is the ending of one world and the beginning of a new creation. Jesus comes on the scene announcing, "The kingdom of God is at hand" – that is, Jesus has inaugurated the "age to come" right now. When Jesus talks about the kingdom of God, he is not talking about something we won't experience until after we die. God's great future purpose is not to rescue people *out* of the world, but to rescue the present world itself.

If we take this insight with us as we read Chapter 13 and set aside the assumption that all of this imagery is about the future end of the world, what might Jesus actually be talking about? I'm going to point out three things in this reading that I want you to file away in your brain and bring them out the next two Sundays as we read Mark's passion account in chapters 14-15 next Sunday and then on Easter Sunday, his resurrection account in chapter 16.

First, remember Jesus' comment that the stones of the temple will all be thrown down. When Jesus is on trial before the chief priests, some witnesses testify that Jesus had said, "I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands." The temple was understood to be the place where heaven and earth intersect. Over and over again in all four gospels, Jesus presents himself to be the place where God and humanity meet. As such, Jesus himself becomes the temple and on the third day, in his resurrection, the new temple is in place. Jesus is the cornerstone and all who follow Jesus' teachings about the kingdom of God are the living stones which make the temple visible and active in the world.

We chose the theme "Building with Living Stones" for our capital appeal back in November and it was in January when we chose March 12/13 to be the dates for the main capital appeal events, but it wasn't until two weeks ago that I looked at the Narrative Lectionary and discovered that our text today would be about the temple stones. I wish I could take credit for some very creative thinking about bringing all of this together, but I can't. So I'll just chalk it up to this being a "God thing."

The second thing I want you to remember next week as we read the passion is that Jesus here in Chapter 13 tells the disciples to keep alert for they do not know when the time will come – not the end of the world, but the time when the new age will dawn. He says we will not know if the time will be in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn. Here's what happens in the next chapter: On Thursday Jesus and his disciples make arrangements for the Passover. And then Mark writes, "**When it was evening**, Jesus came with the twelve." (14:17) Then comes the Last Supper and they go to the Garden of Gethsemane, where three times Jesus leaves Peter, James, and John to watch while he goes to pray for an hour, which takes us to about **midnight**, and each time he returns he finds them sleeping (14:32-42). Then Jesus is arrested and taken to the chief priests for a trial, and Peter waits outside and denies knowing Jesus three times, and when he denies him the third time in the predawn darkness, **the cock crows**. (14:72) Chapter 15 begins, "**As soon as it was morning**, the chief priests bound Jesus and handed him over to Pilate." (15:1)

What was it that Jesus said in Chapter 13? "You do not know if the time will be in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn." Mark knows exactly what Jesus is talking about in chapter 13 and if we just pay a little attention he makes it clear to us, his readers. The dawning of the new age happens when Jesus dies on the cross. We can (and often do) rip chapter 13 out of its context and are perplexed thinking Jesus is talking about the end of the world as we know it. But when we read Chapter 13 as Mark intended, as foreshadowing of what is about to take place on the cross, where the kingdom of God that Jesus has been proclaiming is seen most clearly, where the new creation starts, then chapter 13 is no longer a cause for embarrassment. It's a roadmap for what follows.

Chapter 13 ends with Jesus saying "And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake." That's there for our benefit, the readers of the gospel – "Keep awake as you read the rest of my story and you will hear how it happens that a new temple replaces the old temple." Here's the third thing to listen for next week. When Jesus is nailed to

the cross, darkness comes upon the whole land. (Remember in chapter 13 it says the sun will be darkened?) When Jesus takes his last breath, Mark says “The curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.” The curtain of the temple, that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple, that separated heaven from earth, was torn in two from top to bottom, signifying that it was God who was removing the curtain. And then, at that crucial point, the Roman centurion standing at the foot of the cross facing Jesus’ body, says, “Truly this man was God’s Son!”

I will no longer be tempted to skip chapter 13 of Mark’s gospel. I have learned that chapter 13 is problematic only when you read it all by itself and don’t pay attention to what Mark says before and after it. I hope you’ll be back the next two Sundays to hear how Mark masterfully proclaims that the new age – the kingdom of God, the new creation – breaks out in the death and resurrection of Jesus. And I encourage you to ponder what it means for each of us to be living stones built on the foundation of Jesus Christ, that we are the Body of Christ, the church, the holy community where God meets us in word and sacrament.