

“Overturning Stones”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
November 14, 2021 – Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 28
Daniel 12:1-3; Mark 13:1-8

Have you ever had an experience that turned your whole life upside down? If you're a human, you've probably had several of these. While they may not happen every day, we do experience life-changing, reality-altering events and moments from the second we take our first breath to the time we take our last. These come in all shapes and sizes. Some are experienced by all in our society, whereas others are experienced by just a few, perhaps by just our family or ourselves.

Jesus talks about such life-changing and reality-altering experiences in today's gospel lesson, which is the last of our readings from the Mark's gospel, as the new liturgical year begins in a couple weeks with the first Sunday of Advent, and with it begins a new, year-long series of readings from the gospel of Luke. In our reading for today, Jesus and his disciples are outside of the temple in Jerusalem sometime during the Passover celebration of the week of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. As they stroll away from the temple, one of the students marvels about the grand, glorious scale of the temple. The meaning of his words in the original Greek text of the gospel is this: "Behold what amazing stones and what amazing buildings!" Teacher Jesus replies that the marvelous stones of those marvelous buildings will soon be overturned, which doesn't seem like much of a feel-good lesson during a time of celebration, as there would have been much merriment at the temple grounds and throughout Jerusalem as family and friends gathered there, as they did each year, having traveled from near and far, to remember the deliverance of God's people from bondage in Egypt. But that was the core of Jesus' message, not only during that last week of his life, but throughout his years of ministry. He taught that the Realm of God was coming soon and that the just reign of God would change everything, overturning even the structures that seem so permanent and immovable.

The temple in Jerusalem was just such a structure. During the time of Jesus, it was indeed something to behold. It was the second temple built at that site, on a hill above the City of David, as the first one was destroyed when Jerusalem was

sacked by the Babylonians. The second temple was built only a couple generations after the first was destroyed, when the Persians conquered the Babylonians and allowed the Israelites to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple. This second temple was a center of worship for 500 years before King Herod the Great began a massive expansion project, doubling the size of the temple and its grounds. Herod's plan called for the temple complex to be five football fields long, three football fields wide, and nine stories tall, with walls that were 16 feet thick. Construction on this colossal project began 20 years before Jesus was born and continued throughout his lifetime and beyond. It was still underway when Rome destroyed the temple in 70 CE during a time of revolt. All that remains today is one massive wall of the foundation. Have any of you been to the Western Wall in Jerusalem? It is still something to behold, isn't it?

You could imagine that when Jesus predicted that their colossal temple, a symbol of cultural pride, and its great stones would be overturned, his disciples may have marveled about his words more than they marveled about the greatness of the temple itself. How could Jesus foresee the destruction of something so important to them? Was it even possible that stones so grand could be overturned? And when would this overturning take place? Jesus taught them that the events they would experience in their lifetimes -- wars and rumors of wars and disasters caused by nature and human nature -- were moments of overturning that would continue until the Realm of God on earth became fully realized and all things were turned to the direction of God's choosing.

Jesus' prediction of destruction is for us not bad news, but good news. For our old ways must be overturned for new ways to begin. And we have many old ways that are in need of overturning. The good news is that there is no structure so grand and immovable that it cannot be moved or removed by God. There is no human system so massive and unflinching that it cannot be rearranged or changed by God. And God the Creator is busy at the work of re-creation in our lives and in our world.

This is good news in our world as we face so much bad, heart-breaking news caused by our own selfish and violent ways. We see racism deeply imbedded in our society, revealing itself in big and small ways, causing some to rise at the expense of others. We see our love and idolization of lethal weapons and our

right to wield them destroying the lives of so many. We see our intolerance and hatred of the other causing unbridgeable divisions between us. We see our desire to cheaply enjoy conveniences only gained through the production of energy outweighing our active concern for the health of our planet and the wellbeing of our children and their children. These stones, it seems, despite our efforts to push are pull them, are unmovable.

And each of us as people deal with our own bad news. We are gripped by anxiety, depression, and a host of other mental illnesses. We are addicted to chemicals that destroy us and cause harm to those we love. All too often, our heads are rock hard and our hearts are as cold and unflinching as granite. These massive stones we face as people seem to be so much larger than we are, and we wonder how we can survive under their weight.

The good news is that God is the great stone over-turner, and God is at work, overturning the structures and ways of being that seem to press us down and crush us. All of the heart-breaking events of the world and their causes are not greater than God. All of our ways of living that cause us and those who love us to hurt are not greater than God. The one who called the universe into being and blessed it with order, can re-create and re-order your life and our world. May God, who is in the stone-turning business, overturn the great stones in your life and the life we share. Amen.