

26 Pentecost Mark 13:1-8
Christ and Grace November 18, 2018
Robin Teasley

The collect appointed for today, tells us that God caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, and in that prayer we asked God to help us to hear the scriptures, to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ.

One of the reasons I love this prayer is because it tells us what we receive when we spend time with scripture – the blessed hope of everlasting life. Spending time with scripture means thinking *and praying* about what we hear and read. Spending time with scripture means not just a surface reading but a continual exploration, a repeated immersion in God’s word throughout our lives. This is why it’s a good thing to read scripture as part of our daily devotions. This is why most of our Sunday Adult Education forums focus on scripture.

When we gather for worship we are intentional about following a three-year lectionary – which guarantees that we will cover a good bit of the Old Testament, or Hebrew scripture, and almost all of the New Testament. Reading scripture, studying and talking about the biblical stories with others in our faith community, gives us the tools we need to read it prayerfully on our own. As we develop a habit of reading scripture, we begin to see how these ancient words connect with us today, impact our lives, and actually become fuel for life and nourishment for growth.

As humans, we know that what we consume we also become. As parents, this is why we give our children healthy food. We also monitor what their eyes and ears take in, overseeing what they read, and allowing only so much screen time. We expose them to the arts, bring them to church, and make sure they get some physical activity. And we give them love. We feed them so much more than food, don’t we? The stories in the Bible need to be part of our diet.

I can still remember when I got my first Bible; in fact, I still have it. My grandmother gave it to me when I turned 5 – it’s white leather and it has my name engraved on it. The zipper pull is a tiny gold cross. It’s got that very thin paper and it’s a red-letter edition so it’s easy to find everything Jesus says. There are color plates for the best stories, and lots of maps in the back. Now I have lots of Bibles - it’s a clergy hazard! And feeding on the scriptures, inwardly digesting God’s word over time, has given me wisdom and joy. Just as importantly, the scriptures give me perseverance and hope when life gets overwhelming and I am afraid. That’s what chapter 13 of Mark’s Gospel is addressing. Fear in the face of uncertainty, and fear in the face of the reality of life.

Jesus and his disciples have just come out of the Temple, where Jesus had to point out to them the widow with the two small copper coins because all they could see were the big givers, the important people. And what is the first thing one of the disciple says when they get outside? “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” I imagine Jesus doing an eye roll or a face palm here! He then tells them that not one stone will be left upon another, that all will be thrown down. As you might imagine, this creates all kinds of anxiety for the disciples and so they ask Jesus when this will happen and what will be the sign to let them know. Disciples then

and now have this need to be in the know, to be able to take control of things! I'm convinced that this is so often the cause of our fear and anxiety – this idea that we have to manage it all, as if we ever really have any control of it.

As often happens, Jesus does not answer the question. Instead Jesus uses this opportunity to teach them how they are to live as disciples in the midst of turmoil and persecution. He does this through the use of a literary form that was common in the centuries leading up to that time. Apocalypse, from the Greek word *apokalypsis*, literally means to reveal, to uncover, a disclosure of something hidden, a vision of heavenly secrets that can make sense of earthly realities.

Jewish apocalyptic writing often spoke of impending turmoil and the end of the world, not as a prediction of the future and not to cause fear, but to be a comfort to those who, living by the word of God, would endure through any calamity. Jesus tells the disciples that in their first century newsfeed there will be people who will try to lead them astray, that they will hear of wars, that nations will rise against nations, that there will be earthquakes and famines. But none of this should have been shocking news. God's people had been enduring calamity of one kind or another since the beginning, and the point of Jesus' words was to comfort and encourage the disciples. Jesus was reminding them of the vision of God's kingdom prepared for us and of the promise that Jesus would be with us through it all.

So what has changed? In what ways does our world today seem apocalyptic, tumultuous, destined for disaster? Our newsfeed today hasn't changed all that much. One war seems to follow another, nations still rise against nations, children are still starving (what's happening in Yemen is heartbreaking), and there are floods, storms, fires, and earthquakes. The violence of mass shootings and our political climate increase our fear and anxiety.

And what about our individual lives? Most of us can name our own personal apocalypses as we lose jobs, suffer illness, end relationships, care for aging family members, or wait for our prodigal children to return home. But what is it that these stones being thrown down are revealing to us?

The disciples most likely believed that the destruction of the temple would mean the end of their world, but Jesus made it clear that when these kinds of things happen it is not the end of the world. Stones have been thrown down since humanity figured out how to stack them up. But Jesus ends this passage by saying that this is but the beginning of the birth pangs. Jesus is comforting the disciples, right where they are in their fear, with a word of hope.

Birth pangs mean that the labor is beginning, that new life is on the way. Do we focus on the pain or on the new life? Jesus calls us to give birth to hope, here and now, in this life. We cannot know the future, and cannot understand why stones are thrown down. But what we can know and understand is that Jesus is with us in our fear. We have been given holy scripture, and we have been given this holy space where we gather to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the Word that helps us make sense of our lives and the newsfeed that never stops. I encourage you to take a break from the newsfeed the media provides for us, and instead spend some time in God's holy, life giving, and eternal good news. Because that is where new life in Christ awaits us! Amen.