

Falling Stones and New Life

A Sermon for the Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost

November 14, 2021

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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." Mark 13:1-8

In 2010 I was in seminary and on a beautiful day in October the chapel caught fire. Built in 1881, the chapel was holy ground for generations of seminarians, with walls steeped in the prayers of thousands, stained glass windows splashing color throughout the space, and floors and pews that creaked with praises to God. As it burned to the ground, we stood watching in disbelief, crying and praying and comforting one another. As I watched, even though the chapel was built of wood and slate, I remembered Mark 13, "Do you see this great building? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

We spent that year of seminary in a liminal, in between place. We created a makeshift worship space in another building, and then a more permanent one that we would use until the new chapel was built and consecrated a few years later. What we learned as we lived and prayed and worshiped among the fallen stones of our beloved chapel, is that we could still live and pray and worship. We learned that when beloved material things are destroyed, when something dear to us disappears, it is not the end. We learned that God is present in old chapels, in makeshift and temporary chapels, in brand new chapels, and most importantly, in our very hearts - always.

Frederick Buechner, pastor and theologian, described the presence of God in this way, "Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you."

So when the world is tumbling down around us, when the pandemic rages, when hurricanes and earthquakes and wars among nations threaten, when all that we have depended upon falls like large stones as jobs are lost, relationships are broken, and hearts are aching over prodigal children, listen for the still small voice telling us it is not the end. When things fall apart, we can trust that God is still there with us, helping us walk through the rubble, ruin, and failure.

When all the stones have been thrown down, that is where God does a new thing; that is when God begins to turn the world around. The media informs us 24/7 of stones being thrown down. Every day we continue to hear of wars and skirmishes around the world, nations against nations, and politicians at odds. We hear the rumors of fear, resentment, and hatred. But it is not the end and we are not alone. We live in a power greater than any of that when we choose to live in peace, to choose hope, and to respond with love. The birthpangs will result in new life and growth, and for that we are thankful. New life is made visible as we share our abundance with others so that none go hungry, as we love our neighbor, and as we welcome the stranger.

Whatever stones are falling around you, do not be alarmed, do not be afraid. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs. New life is on the way. Amen.