

THE BEGINNING

Mark 13:1-8 Text vs. 8 *“Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.”*

In our lesson last week about the Widow’s mite, we learned that Jesus had sat in the Temple in Jerusalem and watched how the Jewish Treasury system worked. And in our lesson this week He took a seat on the Mount of Olives across from the Temple from where He could see the entire Temple site in Jerusalem and shared some of His thoughts on what He saw. On the way to where He sat, Jesus had made His view about the Temple known, which was, the Temple system was morally bankrupt. It was not long for this world.

Now, here’s our lesson. *“As Jesus was leaving the Temple, one of His disciples said to Him, ‘Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!’ Jesus replied. ‘Do you see all these great buildings?’ ‘Not one stone here will be left on another. Everyone will be thrown down.’ Then, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked Him privately, ‘Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?’ Jesus said to them: ‘Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in My name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen. But the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation. And kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places. And famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.’”*

Now, you need to understand, Jesus’ words were like Old Testament prophecy about the upheaval to come. They applied to the immediate moment of which Jesus spoke. But He also spoke of things, and events, across time and place. The disciples were in awe of the grandeur of the Temple. It was a symbol of Jewish religious and national pride. Jesus, however, changed their focus from the physical appearance of the Temple to a spiritual reality when He predicted the destruction of the Temple. He pointed out that earthly structures, no matter how magnificent, were temporary. The Temple in Jerusalem had always been a significant place. From David who wanted to build it, to Herod the Great who decided to rebuild it, the Temple had always been a place to admire.

But it wasn’t a beacon of hope to those in need, as we learned from the story of the Widow’s mite last week! Its greatness was connected to the ruling party. To those religious leaders who oversaw it. Which should remind us, humans were behind the giant stones and the ornate furnishings and wealth displayed in the Temple, which should remind us that our faith should not be attached to physical buildings or institutions. But to God alone! Jesus warned His disciples: Be on guard against deception, because in times of uncertainty and turmoil, many false prophets and messiahs will arise.

Now, false prophets are people who pretend to speak for God to get attention and power. They often make big promises that sound good, but are just lies. Beware of false prophets! Because they hold false teaching that could lead us, not to Jesus Christ and God, but to the devil and eternal damnation. They will claim to have the answers. But Jesus’ message was clear! Stay alert. Stay grounded in the truth.

That’s as relevant today as it was then. We live in a world filled with misinformation and false teachings. Our challenge is to determine the truth and remain steadfast in our faith. Since the beginning of life on earth, Satan, has been at work trying to lead God’s people astray. Sometimes, he doesn’t need much help from us. Our hearts. Our pride. And our ignorance does it for us. The world has always fought and rebelled against the coming of God’s Kingdom. And this resistance will continue until the very end—until God puts a complete stop to it by ushering in a new heaven and earth. Jesus’ words of warning speak to our present time.

In verses 5 to 8 He gave a description of our time. Here we are, still dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic. People being led astray by conspiracy theorists from getting the vaccine or other public health practices like wearing masks. Frankly, it’s bad theology. Have you heard the argument that wearing a mask is a sin, because it covers up the image of God? Or that Jesus’ blood is the only protection needed against the disease? Then there’s the false idea that getting preventive treatment protects you from disease. Things like vaccinations, cancer screenings and annual checkups. But it’s the care you take to stay healthy and reduce your chances of getting sick that counts. When those sorts of arguments are made and connected to the name of Jesus, they are examples of what Jesus warned about in verse 6: *“Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many.”*

Christians throughout the Roman world were directly affected by the power struggles that followed Nero’s death and the Jewish uprising. Wars, and rumors of war weighed heavily on everyone’s mind and overall well-

being. And those difficulties didn't stop with the destruction of the Temple. Jesus said, those struggles and hardships were just the beginning of the end—the end that we continue to anticipate today.

We left Afghanistan after twenty years of combat. And now the Taliban has taken over that country that is not recognized by any country. And has been internationally condemned for restricting human rights, banning women from holding almost any jobs, requiring women to wear head-to-toe coverings such as the *burqa*, blocking women from travelling without male guardians, and banning all education for girls. There's the war in Ukraine with Russia pushing towards three-quarters of a million casualties in the war. Russian casualties are creeping towards 2,000 every 24 hours. And South Korea says North Korean Troops are in Russia engaged in combat with Ukraine. Israel is surrounded by Gaza and Lebanon, enemies who want to destroy it. The Palestinian death toll from Israel attacks in Gaza has risen to 43,172 and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah fired 190 projectiles toward Israel last Monday. But there's still the threat of nuclearized Russia, Iran, and North Korea. Or an arms race with China and Russia. And we have just learned that after all the trillions of dollars we have given Ukraine, they are now capable of creating a simple atomic bomb just as we did with the Manhattan Project in WWII.

So, when Jesus told us to not be afraid, He recognized this was “par for the human race” until He comes again! So—war is part of our fallen human nature. It makes us who we are. Because the world is not completely won over to Christ and transformed by the Holy Spirit. And earthquakes and famines? We continue seeing the devastation caused by natural disasters like hurricane Helene. And now we are keeping an eye on Sara who may be coming our way. We're being constantly warned by the Pope of the coming crises brought on by climate change, which he says is the real challenge of our century And the way Covid has directly disrupted supply chains around the world. In other words, all the things Jesus said that were coming, *are still coming*. His prophecy was for His time. As well as for our time! He was speaking about the human condition and world situation until all things are made right at His Second Coming. And there is hope!

The destruction of the Temple was actually a good thing. It showed that the old order of human sin that led away from God would be utterly and completely destroyed. Not one stone of abuse or power that led towards abusive gain would stand. The Kingdom of God is to be fully established. We can hope without fear. We can be alert without being alarmed. No need to be overly consumed with worry. Because human tragedies are part of the way things are, now. Not the way things will be!

The *Signs of the Times* Jesus spoke of as “the beginning of birth pains” are wars, earthquakes, and famines. But they are not the end. They point to the end. The coming of God's kingdom. They remind us that we are living in a broken world. The promise of the Triune God to establish a *new heaven and new earth* and defeat the powers of deceit and evil is “*not yet*.” The Kingdom of God is being established and transforming the world. But it's not yet fully realized. God is at work bringing about a *new creation*. And our response to these signs should not be fear, but hope. And to be ready. We're called to be active in God's redemptive work. To bring hope and healing to a hurting world.

The New Testament spells that out. Jesus Christ is the New Cornerstone. And each of us has become a living, breathing temple of God's Holy Spirit. Living for our God, our lives are meant to be an impressive building. Our bodies are the Temple of God. That's a powerful and profound concept! And it's found in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (NIV) where the Apostle Paul asked the Corinthians: “*Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies.*” So, Jesus *is* the One we want to “copy.” Remember, your *hope* is not in the things of this world, but in the eternal promises of God. Stay alert. Decide the Truth. And be a part of God's mission. If you do, you will find strength and courage in the knowledge that, despite the turmoil that is all around us, God is still in control. Jesus said, “*Do not be alarmed. Such things must happen.*” And His kingdom *is* coming! AMEN.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your Words that guide and sustain us. Help us to remain watchful and understanding in these times of uncertainty. Strengthen our faith. Fill us with hope as we await the fulfillment of Your promises. Use us as instruments of Your peace and love in this world. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.