

## Rocks and Ruins

Mark 13:1-8

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First  
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on November 15, 2015]

### I

On August 23, 2011, a 5.8 magnitude earthquake occurred 85 miles southwest of our nation's capital, Washington, D.C.

Among the buildings damaged by the quake was one of the most impressive structures ever built in the history of our nation,  
the Washington Monument.

Standing 555 feet tall, the Washington Monument is one of the tallest stone structures in the world.

It stands guard over our nation's capital in honor of its name-sake,  
George Washington,  
and as testimony to the engineering prowess of humankind  
and the strength of a nation bold enough to design and build it.

But during the earthquake, stones were shaken loose,  
debris fell both inside and outside the monument,  
and cracks opened so wide that light shone through.

Repairs to the Washington Monument took nearly three years and cost an estimated 15 million dollars. It reopened last year and I hope to finally go up in it on my next trip to D.C.

### II

Now when you hear the earthquake damage to the Washington Monument,  
you may very well be thinking, "So, what?"

Earthquakes happen and buildings are damaged all the time,  
so why make a big deal about it?

However, for followers of Jesus Christ, the cracks the earthquake caused in the Washington Monument reveal a great truth,  
     if we choose to see it.

That truth is that every man-made thing will ultimately crack and crumble.

Even the best of what we “build” in this life—  
     be it a monument to a president,  
         our dream house,  
             our beautiful church home,  
                 a sterling reputation,  
                     or a portfolio filled with stocks and bonds—  
 is ultimately susceptible to decline,  
                                 decay,  
   and destruction.

In J.R.R. Tolkien’s wonderful book The Hobbit  
     (which Peter Jackson managed to ruin by turning a simple children’s fable  
     into three long, bloated movies),  
 Bilbo Baggins meets the character Gollum for the first time when Bilbo is lost and  
 needs to find his way out of the bottom of a deep, dark tunnel in the Misty  
 Mountains.

Gollum proposes a riddle game and if Bilbo wins,  
     Gollum will show him the way out.

If Gollum wins, well, let’s just say the outcome for Bilbo will not be pleasant.

Back and forth they go telling riddles and guessing the answers,  
     until Gollum comes up with this riddle:

*This thing all things devours,  
 Birds, beasts, trees, flowers;  
 Gnaws iron, bites steel;  
 Grinds hard stone to meal;  
 Slays king, ruins town,  
 And beats high mountain down.*

Bilbo is completely flummoxed.

He begins to get frightened,  
 which is a bad thing for trying to think clearly.

Gollum starts to move in for the kill, and all Bilbo can think is,  
 “Give me more time.”

But all that comes out of his mouth with a sudden squeal is,  
 “Time, time,”  
 which is, of course, the answer to the riddle.

Time devours all things...

*Gnaws iron, bites steal;  
 Grinds hard stone to meal;  
 Slays king, ruins town,  
 And beats high mountain down.*

Temples and monuments will crumble...  
 buildings will eventually collapse...  
 and the forces of erosion will ultimately cause  
 the largest and toughest rocks to crumble into ruin.

### III

But don't let the cracks in the Washington Monument serve as the only reminder  
 of this truth.

Take it from Jesus, himself.

In Mark 13, Jesus and his disciples have arrived in Jerusalem and come to the  
 Temple,  
 which by all accounts was an amazing piece of architecture.

Begun by Herod the Great fifty years earlier,  
 it was finally nearing completion.

It occupied a platform more than 900 feet long and 1,500 feet wide—  
 twice as large as the Roman Forum with its many temples,  
 and four times as large as the Acropolis in Athens with its Parthenon.

The huge restraining walls that supported the Temple were composed of great white stones as wide as 40 feet and weighing as much as 50 tons.

Some of those stones are part of the Western Wall to this day.

The front of the Temple itself was a huge plaza,  
 150 feet square,  
 much of it decorated in silver and gold.

The Jewish historian Josephus writes,

*“The exterior of the building wanted nothing that could astound either mind or eye. For, being covered on all sides with massive plates of gold, the sun was no sooner up than it radiated so fiery a flash that persons straining to look at it were compelled to avert their eyes, as from the solar rays. To approaching strangers it appeared from a distance like a snow-clad mountain; for all that was not overlaid with gold was of purest white.”*

No wonder the disciples say with amazement:

*“Look, teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!”*

The rural Galilean peasants and fishermen who followed Jesus had never seen anything like it.

Not only were they impressed by the Temple’s splendor,  
 but by what it represented:  
 the dwelling place of God at the center of the known world,  
 the symbol of God’s presence with God’s people, Israel.

This was more than a temple in which to worship God;  
 it was an incredible accomplishment of human ingenuity.

Yet Jesus makes clear to his disciples that there would come a day when even this awe-inspiring work of Herod’s hands, and all it represented, would be toppled.

Toppled, not by earthquakes  
 or marauding armies,  
 but ultimately by the judgment of God himself.

## IV

No doubt, Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the Temple was deeply troubling to all who heard it.

Read on into Mark 14 and you will see that the charge that Jesus said he would destroy the Temple and replace it in three days with one not made with hands was one of the false accusations made against him at his trial before the Jewish council.

For the Jewish people there was an essential understanding that God dwelt within the Holy of Holies in the Temple itself.

The Temple was central to their faith and identity as the people of God.

This is part of the reason why we hear the disciples marveling at the Temple.

Just as the Washington Monument reflects the greatness and glory of 19<sup>th</sup> century America,

the great stones and wondrous architecture of the Jerusalem Temple were a reflection of God's power and glory.

Yet, while the disciples stand gazing in awe at the sight,  
Jesus proclaims a counter message.

At the end of the twelfth chapter of Mark's gospel,  
which we read last week,

Jesus denounces the Temple system which exploits the widows,  
devouring their houses,  
while the Scribes and Pharisees build their personal privilege and wealth.

For Jesus the Temple itself,  
rather than being representative of God and God's love,  
has reduced the essence of the faith to ruins.

Throughout the Old Testament there is a voice crying out on behalf of...  
the widow and the orphan,  
the poor and the alien.

The prophet Micah said,

*“What does the Lord require of you*

*but to do justice,  
and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?”* (Micah 6:8)

The prophet Amos called on the people of Israel to

*“...let justice flow down like waters  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”* (Amos 5:24)

Loving God was not simply about pious rituals and cultic observances,  
but about serving the needs of others,  
lifting up the last,  
the least,  
and the lost.

At the heart of Jesus’ entire ministry is concern for others—  
for healing and wholeness,  
for inclusion and reconciliation.

Jesus foretelling the destruction of the Temple was yet another counterpoint to the way things had been done and who God’s concern was for.

It is interesting to note that some NT scholars date Mark’s gospel to around the year 65 A.D.—  
some 35 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Nero was the Emperor and there had already been a series of persecutions of the Jews and the fledging Christian community,  
still largely identified as a sect of Judaism.

After the Great Fire of Rome, Nero accused Christians of causing the fire and used this as an excuse to persecute them,  
putting hundreds, perhaps even thousands, to death.

Those hearing this story of Jesus predicting the destruction of the Temple may well have wondered where things were heading,  
given the situation under Nero.

Jesus’ warnings about wars and rumors of wars,  
earthquakes and famines in various places,

may have felt more real as a result of what Christians in Rome were facing at that time.

We know in hindsight that Jesus' words did come true.

In 66 A.D. the Jews revolted against their Roman occupiers.

Just 4 years later Roman legions under Titus destroyed the city of Jerusalem and razed the Temple to the ground.

Yet for Jesus, his prophecy was not about the end,  
but about new beginnings.

His words were words of hope and encouragement in the face of great suffering and tribulation.

God's glory and God's future are not contained within the walls of a building.

Rather, the hope of God is found in community...  
and in love...

and in the promise of a future beyond any suffering  
which God's people might currently be experiencing.

## V

Furthermore, we must understand that when Jesus spoke the words of Mark 13 to the disciples,

he was continuing the task of reorienting them in their faith—  
giving them the resilience and the hope they would need to face an uncertain future.

He wanted his followers to understand that...

God is not contained within even the walls of the Temple, and...

God's love transcends any one specific place and any one specific people.

These are important lessons for us as we near the completion of our church roofing project and the costs we are incurring and the challenge of meeting our budget and sustaining our ministry in the years to come.

It is difficult to avoid trying to justify our decision to spend so much money on the building at this point in our life as a congregation.

Yet in the mixed up world in which we find ourselves,  
what lessons can we take from Jesus' words?

I believe we should listen carefully to Jesus' critique of the Temple system  
and consider how Jesus challenged accepted practices.

Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the Temple was not ultimately about  
dismantling God...  
but about new beginnings in faith.

This brings me back to our predicament today—  
spending money on our own bricks and mortar and shingles.

Simply keeping this church open is a very expensive proposition.

Why spend the money?

Or, as one ruling elder (who will remain nameless) asked at the Session meeting  
Tuesday evening,  
*"Where does this end?"*

Why try to maintain this historic yet increasingly expensive building when there  
might be less costly alternatives?

For me, the question comes down to this:

**What is the ministry that is radiating out from this building?**

While this church building, like all others,  
is dedicated to the work and glory of God,  
the building itself does nothing for God's glory if utilized only  
as an expression of our members' personal piety and devotion,  
as a private chapel maintained for the comfort and convenience of a faithful few.

If this edifice is not an instrument for the building of God's kingdom,  
proclaiming the gospel of God's love for all people,  
and meeting the needs of our community,



than we are in a state of dementia or amnesia  
about who we are as God's people.

The life of God's people was not founded on bricks and mortar...  
but on love for people of all sorts and conditions—  
pre-school children and junior high youth...  
high school students and senior adults...  
millennials,  
Gen-Xer's,  
and aging baby boomers like me,

## VI

Friends, the world is littered with the bones of old churches.

Anyone who has ever toured Europe no doubt has walked through a few.

It would be naïve to think that this building and this place will always be a church.

And, indeed, this beautiful sanctuary will someday crumble into dust—  
perhaps not for another hundred years or more  
(especially with a new roof)...  
but as Gollum's riddle put it,

*Time...all things devours,  
Birds, beasts, trees, flowers;  
Gnaws iron, bites steel;  
Grinds hard stone to meal;  
Slays king, ruins town,  
And beats high mountain down.*

So as expensive as it is, we need to take this roofing project as an opportunity—  
an opportunity to look inward to our faith...  
and an opportunity to look outward toward those whom God is calling  
us to love and serve in the community around us—  
widows and orphans...  
aliens and strangers...  
God's people all.

The ministry of Jesus expands the vision of where God is and who God loves.

As a people seeking to be renewed in our faith and commitment...  
 and praying for the renewal of our congregation,  
 we are stepping out in faith.

This will involve taking risks that move us beyond our comfort zones.

But we must remember that the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem was not the end of the people of God.

God's promises are always bigger than our experiences of life and faith.

God's grace reaches out to all people.

God's kingdom will outlast every monument, temple, and sanctuary.

Even when all the bricks, stones, and rocks of this world have crumbled into ruin, our hope as followers of Jesus Christ will always be...

*When all around my soul gives way,  
 He then is all my hope and stay.*

*On Christ the solid rock I stand,  
 All other ground is sinking sand,  
 All other ground is sinking sand.*

Amen.

Sources:

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