

“May the word of my mouth and the Meditations of our hearts be always acceptable to God, our Creator.”

The Destruction of the Temple
Proper 28, Year B
Mark 13:1-8

In today’s Gospel lesson the disciples were looking at the great Temple of Jerusalem and were marveling at it. “Look, Teacher,” a disciple says. “What large stones and what large buildings!” What exactly were they looking at? Let’s review a little Old Testament history.

We all remember the story of the Jewish people leaving Egypt, how they fled through the Red Sea and began their 40 years of wandering in the desert. Tradition has it that about a year after they left Egypt, God spoke to Moses and gave instructions for the building of a “tabernacle”, an elaborate religious artifact that could be carried from place to place, so as to continuously remind the Jewish people of their special relationship to God. In the simplest terms, it was God’s dwelling place, God’s house. Think of it as a travel trailer for God. Elaborate, yes. Perhaps similar to an Airstream. But still mobile.

This “Ark of the Covenant” remained with the people for many years. Gradually the Jews settled down and established the most powerful and influential kingdom in the region. During the height of the Jewish Monarchy, the reign of King Solomon, the First Temple was built in the capital city of Jerusalem. Inside this magnificent building, the Ark of the Covenant was placed. No longer poor and wandering, the Jewish people created a richly adorned permanent residence for God. God gave up the trailer for a mansion.

But, as always seems to happen, kings behaved badly, factions developed among the people, civil war ensued and the kingdom was split in two. Badly weakened, the Jewish nation was overcome by the powerful Babylonian Empire. Jerusalem the sacked, the temple was destroyed, the

Ark of the Covenant disappeared and the Jews who survived were exiled back into a different country, back into slavery.

With the Temple destroyed, the Jews asked, Where was God now? Did God desert them? Why did God allow this to happen to them? Was God angry with them? Would God ever forgive them? And, most significantly for us, would God send someone, someone like Moses, to gather them up and lead them out of slavery? During the Babylonian exile, hope was hard to come by. God was gone. It felt like the end of the world.

For about 250 years the Jews lived scattered in pockets throughout the area and various powers rose and fell. They remained exiled, dispersed and impoverished. Then, the Persian king who was in power at the time, decreed that he would give the former Jewish kingdom back to the Jews. So, once again, the Jewish people came from near and far to reestablish their earthly kingdom. With help from the Persian emperor, they began to build the Temple in Jerusalem a second time. The Ark of the Covenant was gone, but they could still make a beautiful house for God to live in. Yay! God was back living with his chosen people. But they would never again rise to their former glory. They were culturally and religiously distinct from their neighbors, true. But they were never again in charge of their own political destiny.

Enter Jesus. When Jesus was born the Jews were governed in part by a Jewish royal family, the Herodians, and in part by the Roman empire. This, in and of itself, created its own special tension. Adding to that the Jewish people weren't thrilled about their monarch. Herod the Great, they argued, wasn't really Jewish, rather an Edomite whose father had conveniently converted for political reasons. Oh, he did all the sacrifices and when through the motions. But he didn't seem to understand his God given responsibility to the Jewish people. He required that the size of the Temple be doubled – after all, he reasoned, God, like himself, deserved to live in a palace. A good idea at first glance. The problem was he paid little to no money to the people who were commanded to do the work. Later, Herod's son, began using the Temple for governmental purposes such as the collection of taxes for religious practices, making it difficult or

impossible for poor people to participate in them. The Jewish religious leaders themselves were fighting. The Sadducees and the Pharisees argued about theology and religious authority and even about the existence of angels. In the Jesus' world, the monarchy was oppressing the people, the religious leaders gave little hope or guidance to the people and the Roman soldiers harassed anyone who crossed their path. In fact, the only thing the Romans, the Sadducees, the Pharisees and Herod seemed to agree on was that Jesus was a threat and needed to be eliminated.

So there they all were – Jesus and the disciples -- looking at the Temple, this huge ornate edifice, this astonishing dwelling place of God. And a disciple exclaimed, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” Jesus responds, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

Yep, Jesus saw it coming. Approximately 30 years after Jesus uttered these words the Jews rose up against the Romans and a great war ensued. But the Jews were weakened by divisions within their own ranks. And within three years, Jerusalem was sacked and the sacred Temple, the house of God, was again destroyed. And just like the Babylonian exile so many years earlier it must have seemed like the end of the world.

The end of the world. I suspect that there is not a generation of human beings who has not looked at the chaos around them and wondered, “Is this the beginning of the end?” The survivors of Pompeii, must have thought it. Our own American Civil War made people think it. I joined many in pondering the end of the world after 911. The starving people of Sudan must be wondering it at this very moment. And perhaps the thought may even have passed through some of our minds in the past few days.

The disciples were certainly thinking about it. “What will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” they asked Jesus. Jesus doesn't try to comfort them or tell them not to worry about it. He's honest. “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines.” But then Jesus says something truly remarkable. “This” Jesus says, “is but the beginning of the

birthpangs.” Unlike us, Jesus does not say, “This is the beginning of the end.”

Like many of you here today, I have experienced birthpangs. I know several women who decided to have only one child because they never, ever wanted to go through that experience again. Believe me, NO ONE looks forward to birthpangs. Admittedly, not all birthpangs result in a joyful delivery. But most of the time the pain of labor and birth brings forth something pure, and innocent, and miraculous.

The second destruction of the temple left the Jewish people reeling. God’s house was destroyed, their traditions were shattered and they were in exile again. But it was not the end of the world. For a new understanding of their covenant with God arose. They realized that God didn’t need a house to live in. God could live in their hearts, their homes and their communities. Thus Rabbinic Judaism was born and has remained the way Jews have practiced their faith for 2000 years.

And out of the birth pangs of that chaotic time a strange little Jewish sect emerged, and developed and spread throughout the world. And, when properly practiced this new thing called “Christianity” has brought solace, strength, comfort and salvation to millions of people.

Last week, friend of mine who is an ardent Democrat and a professed atheist called me and asked, “So Madam Theologian, tell me how God could have allowed THAT to happen.”

But God does not take sides in human affairs. A candidate for political office will not be elected on the strength of the prayers of that person’s supporters. God allows us, both as individuals and as nations, to make good choices and learn from them. And God allows us to make bad choices and learn from them. Sadly, history shows us that sometimes people make really bad choices, really, really bad choices. And then we look around and wonder if the end is near.

But our faith tells us that, while God won’t stop us from breaking our world, God will create something good out of those broken places. And it is with

that faith that we look to God with hope, and stand ready to be the midwives of that good in whatever form it comes.

Amen.