

Mark 13:1-8 “Will the Church Come Crashing Down?”

I know I've explained the lectionary before, but let me refresh your memory. The Lectionary is a three-year cycle of scripture readings that a lot of churches and preachers use to help figure out what they're going to preach from week to week. They're divided up into Old Testament, Psalms, Gospels and Epistles. Some people are critical of preachers who use the lectionary because they say, “You're stifling the work of the Holy Spirit! The *Holy Spirit* should be leading you in your preaching, not some dumb ol' lectionary!” And you can tell these folks, “The Holy Spirit *can* work through the lectionary,” but it just sounds like a poor excuse to them.” Let me show you how the Holy Spirit *does* work through the lectionary -- Two months before the fire on the ridge, I chose the gospel reading from Mark for this Sunday. And what is Mark's reading about this week? Jesus reassuring God's presence even after a Holy Place has been destroyed. Don't tell me the lectionary stifles the work of the Holy Spirit because clearly this scripture applies after the events of this past week.

Here's how I want to approach this scripture this morning. I want to borrow an idea from Brian McLaren's book *The Girl with the Dove Tattoo*. The premise of this novel is that Jesus, Mohammed, Moses and the Buddha turn up in today's world, working together to try to get their message of peace and reconciliation and cooperation through to the hostile religious movements that bear their names. So I want to take that idea and imagine what this apocalyptic chapter of the gospel might have sounded like if Jesus had been around today and responding to events in today's world. So here goes –

In early 2018, Jesus and some friends went to Rome to see the Vatican. No one at the Vatican wanted to meet with them, which seemed odd, so the closest Jesus ever got to the Pope was to stand in a crowd as the Pope made an appearance on the balcony over St Peter's Square. Later Jesus and his friends did the Vatican Tourist thing and toured the Basilica, the Vatican museums and the Sistine Chapel. As they were

leaving at the end of the day, they stood just outside the square, looking back across the majestic edifice of the basilica. And his friends were gushing about all they'd seen. "Wow! Isn't this place spectacular? How about all that ornate stonework. The massive scale of the whole place and all that amazing collection of artwork just blow your mind don't they? It's one of a kind! It really gives you a sense of the splendor and permanence of the Church doesn't it?"

But Jesus said, "Pfff! The splendor and permanence of the Church?! The whole thing is going to come crashing down. There will be nothing left of all this "splendor and power and prestige" but a heap of rubble. Even now you can see cracks opening up all over the place, and the best folks can do is just slap plaster on them. They don't even realize how sick the *systems* they've created are, and now it's all coming down around their ears with an earth-shattering crash." And his friends got quiet and were all thinking, "What's gotten into him?"

Later that evening, they were gathered at an outdoor café eating pizza and they started asking Jesus to explain or elaborate on what he said. They said, "So, when do you think these things are going to happen? Is it all planned out? Will there be any secret warning signs we can be watching out for? Clue us in, buddy."

Jesus shook his head and laughed. "Listen, don't get caught up in all that doomsday-prepper, Left Behind, Late Great Planet Earth sort of stuff. Don't go thinking there's a secret plan in everything and a code to be cracked that will unlock a map to the future. There's always going to be crazies saying, 'Hey, follow me! I'm the One who knows! I've figured out the secret code of the Book of Revelation and I can guide you safely through the terrors to come.' They honestly don't care about anything except selling books and convincing people they've got it all figured out. Way too many gullible people get sucked into all this craziness. Every time there's something serious in the news, these fanatics crank up the speculation machine. A hurricane hits the East Coast, the Israelis and Palestinians start lobbing missiles at each other,

wildfires hit California and all these doomsday prophets say it's all connected and they know what it all means. Listen -- Take a breath and chill out. Yes, these things are going to happen as they *always* have, but they don't all mean that it's the end of the world. People have been making doomsday predictions since the beginning of time, and they're always wrong. Saint Augustine said that when the barbarians were invading the Roman provinces, it was a sign of the end times. And about every 50 years or so, someone comes along and makes a prediction like that, gets everyone riled up, and then it fades away. Here's the reality though -- Nations are going to set out to destroy each other. There will be ethnic conflicts and civil wars. There will be horrendous natural disasters. Millions of people will continue to live in poverty and will starve. This is not new and it will not be the end. See, this is all sort of like a woman going into labor. Right now the world is shuddering in these intense labor pains as it's struggling to give birth to a new ... era. So watch out for yourselves, because this is going to be a very painful time for anyone who's associated with me. As the institutional church plunges into chaos and scandal and it all comes crashing down, everyone who has any sort of link to the church is going to get caught in the crossfire. This is unavoidable. The world will look at the failures and scandals and corruption of the Church and they'll blame me. They'll say, 'See? This just proves that following Jesus is foolish, unhealthy and dangerous to society!' And then they'll harass you and ridicule you and batter you with questions about why you would continue to have anything to do with such a corrupt religious fantasy. Your continued faith will offend them and infuriate them."

But here's what you do -- You use this as an opportunity to show them the difference between the gospel of love and mercy and the false gospel of greed, power and control. But make sure you realize that they're not going to like this. So what do you do? Just continue living as people who live in love and mercy and openness. And don't be all fake about it either. Be *yourselves*. It's how you live that matters, not what you say that will show everyone what I mean to you. Don't worry about it. Let the Holy Spirit do the work of defending me. You're only witnesses, so

all you have to say is what you've experienced yourself. You don't have to explain the big picture. That's the Spirit's job. It will get nasty at times though. Families will be torn apart when one member wants to follow me and another thinks that believing in me is the root of all evil. But hang in there, and let your lives be your witness.

“But here's where it gets tricky. If it gets to the point where the Church itself starts responding with hostility and violence? If they start saying that God is sending hurricanes and fires to punish the wicked, so you better repent, join our crusade, pledge your allegiance to whatever they want you to pledge your allegiance to, then it's probably time to cut and run. If Church leaders start declaring that anyone who attacks them is attacking God and then claims the divine right to retaliate against those they've declared to be God's enemies, get out. Don't waste time trying to see what can be salvaged. Just get out of there before it comes crashing down on you. Yes, you'll have to leave behind some things that have been precious to you, but there will be no time to lose. Get out fast, because the whole thing will be on the verge of exploding into a fiery hell of hatred, accusations, and bloodshed. It will be a worse trauma than anything anyone has ever known before and pretty soon there won't be anyone or anything left at all.

“And be careful when people start pointing to preachers or celebrities or politicians and saying, ‘Oh, they're the anointed one ... the one whose been touched by God for this special time to lead us to safety!’ There will be all kinds of fake prophets and fake messiahs out there trying to win people's allegiance. Stay awake and on your guard. I've already told you all you need to know, so don't go running after those who claim to have all the missing pieces.”

“Finally, when every false idol that anyone's ever put their trust in — whether it's money or power or nation or religion — when all of those things lie in ruins, only then will people start to see the coming of God's reign. Only when people see God's love and grace and forgiveness take center stage will they finally get it. So watch out. Stay alert, because

you have no way of knowing when the time will come. It's like a boss who goes out on vacation and leaves the workers behind to hold the shop down. Don't use the time the boss is away to slack off. You have no way of knowing when the boss will be back. It could be any time of the day or night, early or late. You don't want to get caught asleep in the boss' chair with your boots on her desk. There's only one game plan: Love, love and more love. Forgive, forgive and more love. Keep yourselves on the ready at all times, or else you'll slip back in to a life filled with suspicion, division and retaliation. Hold on tight to hope. Hold on tight to faith. None of this on-again off-again stuff! Think about how to motivate one another to greater and greater love and more and more ways to put it into action. Gather often, support and encourage one another. The closer we get to that final day, the more you'll need one another. Who knows ... it may very well be that the church might come crashing down. But don't obsess or worry over that. Stand up and rejoice, because when the dust settles and the facade has fallen away, just one thing will remain: Love in all its glory, and God is love."