

Pastor Katherine Willis Pershey
“Well, That’s Alarming”
Mark 13:1-8
November 17, 2024

A week ago, Nick preached a moving and challenging sermon that spoke to the pain and complexity of the present by reminding us of some painful and complex moments of the past - in our church and our nation at large. It was precisely the good word I needed to hear. It was grounded in the scripture that comes just before this one in the gospel of Mark. From his seat opposite the treasury, Jesus unleashed a scathing critique of the economic exploitation baked into the temple system. Now, Mark has taken us outside. One of the disciples has just gushed about the spectacular size of the temple. Jesus basically says: *enjoy it while it lasts*. That temple - so big, so impressive - is not long for this world. It will tumble like a Jenga tower. It will fall like a house of cards.

And then, Jesus plops himself down on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple. Y’all, it’s about to get real. This seating arrangement is not casual. Jesus is not chilling out on that mountain. Jesus transforms that mountain into a throne - a seat of judgment. He is, after all, the only one authorized to judge. Just as Jesus spoke hard words about the treasury, now he speaks hard words about the temple. Only - the thing about speaking hard words about the temple is that they can’t be contained in the temple. The end of the temple is tantamount to the end of the world. In the Jewish culture, the temple was not just the focal point of God’s presence on earth. The temple was also the focal point of political, economic, and social power. The temple was everything. The temple was too big to fail.

I remember when that phrase was everywhere, back in 2008 or so. It was about banks, right? And the auto industry. Those economic institutions that were determined to be too critical to the economy to be allowed to crumble. The truth is that a lot of things that are too big to fail, fail anyway, all the time - at least, depending on how you’re defining big. The people who lost their life savings or financial security in the housing crisis certainly felt like their dreams were too big to fail. The norm of children going to school every day was too big to fail, and yet at the start of the pandemic families watched education

squeezed into the space of a Chromebook. Surely, the relationship between a parent and a child is too big to fail, yet more families experience estrangement than ever. The climate is too big to fail, yet I didn't wear a jacket to church today, and the ocean is running a fever. There is no end to the list of things we hope and pray will never fail: marriages, seatbelts, open heart surgeries, the United States of America.

And here is Jesus, sitting opposite the temple, calmly forecasting catastrophic collapse.

My friend Benjamin Dueholm recently wrote, "We live in a malevolent information environment, so I try to ensure that if my preaching ever alienates or scandalizes, it's because of Jesus and not some dumb thing I got hyped about on the internet." Please forgive me that this quote did sort of hype me up, and yes, I did read it on the internet. The sentiment stands. I think it's worth pausing here and acknowledging that this is the kind of biblical passage that is alienating and scandalizing. It is the kind of biblical passage that refuses to let us make-believe that Jesus was nice. You've heard it said that well-behaved women rarely make history. Truly I tell you; well-behaved prophets rarely get themselves crucified by the government. Hear the words of Jesus again:

"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."

Do not be alarmed? Jesus, this is alarming. Jesus, come down from that mountain and help us fix the mess we're in.

Now, I want to be abundantly clear. Jesus is not celebrating chaos or rooting for ruination. Jesus is a realist, however. Jesus seems to understand that human beings have a tendency to misplace our ultimate trust. We may say we want God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, but in all actuality our grip on our own will is fierce. We don't really want anything or anyone to remind us of how brief and tenuous our lives are - or how fragile the things and people we love are.

I suspect this is one of the reasons the safest place to keep a Bible is on your shelf, under a thick layer of dust. That way you don't have to face the psalmist on his extra

truthy days, when he writes, “The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.” That way you don’t have to see the cynical author of Ecclesiastes roll his eyes and mutter that everything is meaningless and there’s nothing new under the sun. That way you don’t have to peer up at Jesus on the mountain implying that it’s the end of the world as we know it, but you should feel fine.

Jesus does not mince words. He does not offer cheap grace or empty comfort - though he sure was right that there would be false prophets. There is no shortage of charlatans happy to sell you a self-help book or an imitation gospel.

Jesus is brutally honest. It may get worse before it gets better. But it is going to get better, better beyond imagining. After all, the ending he anticipates is but the beginning of the birth pains: new life shall emerge.

Jesus’s words may be alienating and scandalizing, but it turns out all this disruption and disorder is not random. Something is happening.

Some of you know that I sometimes experience back pain. It is not a chronic condition, thankfully, but I have a few episodes a year. When I am having back spasms, I cannot function. I cannot get out of bed. I cannot think straight or breathe without wincing. It’s awful, and I’ve spent more time and money than I care to admit trying to find ways to prevent it from happening and treat it when it does. I never knew how to describe the pain until the first time I experienced childbirth. I recognized what was happening. Specifically, I recognized the back labor, which is different from regular contractions. More excruciating, more relentless. The difference, however, between the pain I experience when my back goes into spasm, and the pain I experienced when I gave birth to my children, is that the pain of childbirth at least had a purpose. While I know this is tragically not the case for every pregnancy, for me, labor was replaced by an infant at the end. When my back goes out, there is nothing to show for it. There are just precious days of life lost to the fog of muscle relaxers.

Friends, there is immense grace in opening our imaginations to the promise slipped into the end of this passage. What if all this loss and grief, agony and trauma is not all there is? What if, when we are failed by things that are too big to fail, we aren't left empty-handed and forsaken? What if we end up with new life swaddled in our arms?

If Jesus is telling the truth - and I hope we love and trust the Son of God enough to listen even to his most alienating and scandalous words - then I think we know what we need to do. We need to roll up our sleeves and become midwives. Midwives are companions and witnesses. They cannot take over the work of labor, but they have a front row to the miracle. They offer ice chips and whisper words of encouragement. They persevere until the birth pangs have been redeemed. They remain until the pain of childbirth has been transformed into the ear-splitting cry of a child.

If we are going to participate in this emergence of new life, we must do so from a posture of profound trust in God. We can't be champions of hope if our hearts are held captive by fear. We can't be midwives of resurrection if our primary allegiance is to the good old days. We can't rejoice in new life if we are micromanaging the end of what came before.

But if we *can* be champions of hope? If we *can* be midwives of resurrection? If we *can* rejoice, and trust, we will be participants in the utterly bananas and absolutely beautiful gospel of Jesus Christ.

It's still going to hurt. But the hurt won't have the last word. The failure won't be the finale. Yes, it's alarming. Don't be alarmed. Don't lose hope. It is extraordinarily hard to believe that spring will come when you are facing down winter. It is easy to believe the night will last forever when even the stars are obscured by clouds. The stones may be scattering but hear it again: *God is our Rock and our Redeemer*. May it be so. Amen.