

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

What do you do when the world is falling apart around you? That, I think, is the question lurking behind our readings today as we quickly approach the end of the church year. It's also a question that lurks behind the news we read or listen to these days. The climate change summit in the UK just ended with some progress, but without the needed agreement on goals that would limit the earth's warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius over this century. Climate disasters loom in our future, and in some places they are already beginning to happen. And then there is our social and political polarization, which continues apace, in spite of a somewhat bipartisan effort that finally led to the passage of an infrastructure bill in congress. Still, in spite of that brief glimmer of hope, a significant percentage of the population continues to believe the manufactured conspiracy theories about the last presidential election being "stolen," and the politicization of vaccines and other public health measures to control the pandemic remains. Racial tensions again threaten to erupt in as a couple of high-profile trials wind down. Our institutions and system of government seem to be unraveling in front of us, and some seem content to "burn it all down," as the expression goes. And that's only the national news. Locally we continue to face an increase in gun violence in our community, among other issues.

But even if you don't pay attention to the news, there can be more personal ways in which the world seems to be falling apart. Some of us are facing difficult medical prognoses, others problems at work or in our families or relationships. And death is an ever-present reality that continues to rear its ugly head. We've had four funerals in five weeks here at Grace, and early on Friday we lost yet another member. The reality of our mortality stares us in the face. Like it or not, our personal world will be coming to an end, whether it's a matter of weeks, years, or decades.

The end of the church year is always about the end times, and the end times in Mark's Gospel is particularly striking. We only get a few verses of this apocalyptic chapter here today, and it is our last reading from Mark for the next two years as we prepare to move to the next lectionary cycle. But the eight verses we get are enough, and actually give us a kind of outline for the rest of the chapter. There are three things to notice here in this final episode of Mark before Jesus crucifixion and resurrection, three things that connect with our lives and our sense of apocalyptic foreboding, and then one thing in our reading from Hebrews that gives us encouragement for living in these days.

The first thing to notice in our Mark reading is the initial reaction of the disciples to being at the temple in Jerusalem. You get the sense that this is their first time there, their first trip to the big city from their provincial home up in Galilee. Jesus has just been debating with the scribes in the temple and then pointing out the widow's offering. But their focus isn't on Jesus' teaching. It's on the impressive architecture. "Wow! Isn't it amazing what we humans can do? How in the world did they get these huge stones stacked on top of one another?" We get distracted and impressed by things like that too. Helen and I lived in Chicago back when the Sears Tower was still the tallest building in the world. We took visiting friends there to show it off. Now, I just read, it's only the 23rd tallest building in the world. We are impressed with our achievements as a species. We dam rivers to irrigate deserts. We capture the power of the wind and the sun to generate electricity. We can travel to the other side of the world in less than a day. We have put human beings on the moon and sent robotic spacecraft outside our solar system. And we have

amazingly powerful little computers in our pockets that have the ability to connect us to people around the world and to access vast amounts of information with only a few taps on our little glass screens. Aren't we something?

"All of it is coming down," says Jesus, and that's the second thing to notice in this reading. All those achievements that we take so much pride in are going to disappoint us, especially when we put our ultimate faith and hope in them. The Jerusalem temple, the pride of the Judean people, would be utterly destroyed in 70 AD by the Romans, and its contents of precious metals and gems carted off to Rome. And with the temple went the walls of Jerusalem, and the nationalistic hopes of restoring the kingdom of Israel. It's hard to know what will happen with the things we take so much pride in, but we get hints of potential troubles ahead. The pandemic has emptied out the high-rise office buildings in many cities, and high-rise residential buildings in some areas are looking more like liabilities than assets as they age. The failure to maintain such a building in Florida led to its collapse this past summer, with the loss of almost 100 lives. Our magical little internet devices are connecting us not only to information, but to misinformation and disinformation that are threatening the democratic institutions that we have taken pride in for so long in this country. And our reliance on fossil fuels... well, I've already mentioned that problem. No need to belabor the point.

The third thing to notice in the face of the impending doom that Jesus announces is his advice to his disciples to "not be alarmed" when these disasters take place. "Do not be alarmed! These things are bound to happen." (I like that translation better than "must happen." They're *bound* to happen, so don't be surprised when they do.) People are going to try to use these events to manipulate you, to stoke fear and appeal to your worst instincts, to pit people against each other along racial, social, and religious lines. And who knows what evil you might be capable of when fear gets the better of you? The ultimate message of this chapter of Mark is that when the end comes it will coincide with God finally wresting back control of the world from the powers of sin, death, and evil, and bringing about the good future that God has intended all along. There's the good news in this foreboding reading. God wins in the end.

So where does that leave us now? How do we act in the mean time? Do we eat, drink, and be merry, continuing life as we have lived it up to now, trusting that God will clean up after us as if we were bad husbands and spoiled children? Do we continue to cut down our forests, pollute the environment, and melt the ice caps? Do we continue to exploit and oppress one another for cheap labor, and fight one another for diminishing resources and market share? Our reading from the book of Hebrews gives an alternate vision for our future. God has forgiven us not in order to enable our sinful selfish ways, but to open our hearts and actions to a new and better way of life, a way of life that loves the world as God has loved us, that is willing to sacrifice our own interests for the sake of the common good. And our regular gathering around God's word and sacrament is a crucial part of God's work among us. Here we receive again and again God's forgiveness and the assurance of God's presence with us. Here we encourage and console one another throughout all that life throws at us, including the specter of death. Here we provoke one another to love and good deeds for the sake of our neighbor because of our trust in God's good future.

That's what we do when the world is falling apart around us. We trust that God's kingdom is near and by God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, we begin to conform our lives to the promise of God's final victory.

May it be so. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.