

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of 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 Baku is still in progress, but there is doubt that an agreement can be made on paying poorer countries to pursue greener energy policies. Climate disasters loom in our future, and in some places they are already beginning to happen. We are reaching warming limits warned about decades ago and have not yet succeeded in reversing the warming trend. And then there is our social and political polarization, which continues apace. 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.

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 some significant losses in our community here at Grace this year, and some of us have had our own personal losses. 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 are 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 some 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'll notice that those first two verses are repeated from last week because I included them to make sense of the previous episode. Jesus has just been debating with the scribes in the failing institution of the temple and then pointing out the widow's offering. But the disciples' 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 there are 22 taller buildings in the world. We are impressed with our human achievements. 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 these 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. All of that is truly amazing.

"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 by the Romans in 70 AD, 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. 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 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 we might be capable of when fear gets the better of us? 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 intended at the creation of the world. There's the good news in this foreboding reading. God wins in the end.

But where does that leave us now? Sure, it'll be nice if there's "pie in the sky by and by," but how do we act in the meantime, right now, and does it matter? Should we eat, drink, and be merry, just in case there really is no future, or counting on God to clean up after us if there is? 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 self-centered, destructive ways, but to open our hearts and motivate us for a new and better way of life. That way of life is characterized by loving the world as God has loved us. It makes us willing to sacrifice our own interests for the sake of the common good. It means paying attention to the world around us and caring especially for our neighbors most in need. It means not losing hope in difficult and discouraging time. That way of life is where God is leading us. But let's be real. It's no easy thing to change your way of life, and as I said last week, we will fail a lot along the way. And so we need to look for help. We gather here regularly around God's word and sacrament to be fed and fueled by God's love and forgiveness and strengthened by the assurance of God's abiding presence. 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 we are learning to trust in God's good future. God *does* win in the end, and God's victory is already in progress, right now, amidst all evidence to the contrary.

So *that's* what we do when the world is falling apart around us. We trust that God's kingdom is near, and that by God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit our lives are even now being transformed by the promise of God's final victory.

May God bless the road ahead. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.