

Do Not Be Alarmed!

Mark 13:1-8

Though we still have about a month left before the end of 2024, the liturgical year concludes next week. Perhaps that's why today's lectionary passage focuses on "the end times" or matters of the end. How do you feel when you hear today's reading? I imagine not many of us are thinking, "Wow, this is great! Amen!"

Let's be honest—these biblical passages about the end times can feel confusing and even a bit unsettling. Maybe that's why we don't hear sermons on them very often. Yet, if we pay attention to Jesus' teachings, we find that he didn't shy away from apocalyptic themes. Instead, he spoke about them to prepare his followers, not to scare them. When we hear the term "end times," our minds might immediately jump to something ominous or frightening. Today's passage can certainly provoke those kinds of feelings.

The Grand Temple in Jerusalem

Imagine the scene: in Jesus' time, the Herodian Temple in Jerusalem was an awe-inspiring structure. It was enormous, covering 36 acres—one of the grandest religious buildings in the world. Now, picture the rural folks from Galilee who would come to Jerusalem and be completely overwhelmed by its magnificence. One of the disciples, marveling at its grandeur, said to Jesus, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!"

But Jesus responded with something shocking: "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." The disciples must have felt their hearts sink. For them, the Temple wasn't just a building—it was the very symbol of God's presence among them. It was a source of pride, the center of their religious and national identity. For Jesus to say it would fall... that was like declaring the end of the world as they knew it.

When Our Temples Fall

The disciples' shock and anxiety are not so different from what we feel when the "temples" we have built in our lives start to crumble. Recently, during a church conference where three churches participated together, I witnessed the struggles of congregations doing their best to fulfill their mission yet facing challenges due to dwindling membership. Even 20 or 30 years ago, who would have imagined that our church would receive a part-time appointment? In the 1970s, the United Methodist Church (UMC) had around 11 million members. As of 2023, that number has fallen to about 6.2 million—a 50% decline. And the number of regular worship attendees is even lower, especially with younger generations showing less interest in organized religion. We are witnessing the UMC—a once seemingly unshakable institution—beginning to waver.

It's not just churches, is it? Look around, and we see the collapse of many institutions we once thought unshakable. Who could have imagined the fall of the World Trade Center, a symbol of economic power? I remember watching it on TV from Korea, thinking it was some kind of action movie scene. But it was real. The January 6th Capitol attack—who would have thought that something like that could happen here, threatening our democracy? The COVID-19 pandemic turned our lives upside down overnight. And more recently, we've been witnessing wars in Ukraine, massacres in Gaza—these events make us realize just how fragile our world truly is. Jesus warned his disciples that the "temples" they trusted would crumble. And yet, he also said, *do not be alarmed*. This is not the end.

Finding Hope Amid Signs of the End

After hearing Jesus predict the fall of the Temple, the disciples came to him privately and asked, "When will this happen? What signs should we look for?" But instead of giving them a timeline, Jesus described events like wars, earthquakes, and famines—things that sound all too familiar to us today.

If you watch the news these days, it's filled with similar stories. Wildfires in California, hurricanes in Florida, unexpected freezes in Texas, severe droughts in Arizona, economic crises, conflicts, and wars—it's enough to make us anxious. Sometimes, I wonder if we're on the brink of World War III. Do you feel that way too? A philosopher once said, "If you want to conquer a people, create an imaginary enemy who seems more dangerous than you, then be their savior." We see this play out again and again—fear is stirred up to divide

people, to keep us distracted. Jesus said, “Beware that no one leads you astray.” We must not let our focus be consumed by the chaos around us.

When we face social or personal crises, it’s easy to get caught up in the negative news. Once negative thoughts flood our minds, we begin to sink into despair. But remember: “a ship doesn’t sink because of the water around it but because water gets inside.” Similar to this, our lives don’t sink because of troubles but because we let fear and despair fill our hearts. We must remember that Jesus did not speak of the end times to instill fear in us. The focus should not be on the bad news but the good news. Jesus says, “Do not be alarmed.” Why? Because God is still with us.

God’s Love Never Fails

The Apostle Paul wrote, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come... nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

When wars break out, when tragedies strike, when we face personal crises, it’s easy to feel like God has abandoned us. But that’s when Jesus redirects our focus. He reminds us that the brokenness of this world is not the end of God’s story. The Bible doesn’t end in despair but with the promise of a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21). So, when the "temples" we’ve relied on begin to crumble, we must remember: *God is still with us*. God’s love will never leave us, no matter how bleak the world may seem.

When we believe that God is still with us now and that this present, despairing world is not the end, we can find hope even in the midst of it. And in doing so, we are able to continue working for God's kingdom without losing heart. Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes, a retired pastor from the New England Conference of the United Methodist Church, shared his reflection on Facebook in response to the results of a presidential election. Let me read a portion of it to you:

“I am not optimistic, but I am full of hope. My hope is not in the incoming Administration, but in the grace of God, the goodness of people, and the enduring blessing of Creation... I don't trust there will be any action whatsoever on climate change other than to increase our consumption of fossil fuels... I don't trust that large corporations will have less political power over our lives. I don't trust that mass incarceration will decrease, treatment of immigrants will improve, or hate groups will shrink... I don't trust that education or journalism will be strengthened. I don't trust that my queer and trans friends will be safe. I don't trust that civil rights, voting rights, or women's rights will be protected... I hope they prove me wrong. But I am not optimistic.

BUT I AM FULL OF HOPE. I trust in the goodness of most people, and the enduring power of compassion. I trust that we will learn to care for one another. I trust that millions of people will learn to stand with courage against meanness, injustice, and greed. I trust the power of love over fear. Even if we eventually spiral down into the end of civilization as we know it, we will remain human, and many of us will shine with the light of love till the last day. My hope is in love, not in human leaders.”

We may not be optimistic, but we can still be hopeful if we can see God’s coming kin-dom of love and justice. And as we confess in our baptismal vow, we can continue to reject evil and stand against the world’s injustice and oppression. We cannot do this on our own. Only by firmly trusting that God is with us and believing that God’s kingdom will come on this earth can we continue on this path.

Beloved Asbury family, when the temples we have built and relied upon crumble, and signs of the end times arise, we may feel overwhelmed with fear. But the Lord says, “Do not be afraid.” God leads us to see the hope beyond our fears. God is with us even now and will bring our story to a good completion. No matter how dark the world may seem or how much it appears to be spiraling toward the end, I encourage you to live boldly on this earth, holding on to the boundless hope found in the promises of the Lord. Amen.