

# DON'T BE ALARMED

Mark 13:1-8

Sunday, November 15, 2009

Rev. James Campbell

It was my first day in Jerusalem. I had made the kind of “quick friends” one does when traveling in a group, and together we had set out to explore the Holy City on foot. It was late spring and I remember that the purple bougainvillea was blooming everywhere. After awhile, we crested a hill, and to my complete surprise, there it was: the Wailing Wall, the Western Wall, that piece of foundation of Herod’s Temple. It was bathed in the golden light of the late afternoon sun. And the sight of it stopped me in my tracks.

We approached the Wall and donned the cardboard yarmulkes available in large containers for Gentiles like us. I remember walking up to it and touching it, its massive stones dwarfing me. In between the stones, in the cracks, were thousands of pieces of paper, each containing a prayer. I put mine in there too and remember feeling connected to the ages.

The Wailing Wall is all that is left of Herod’s Temple, a building renowned for its beauty and scope. Historians tell us that it was constructed of white marble that glistened in the bright sunshine. The temple walls were covered with

sheets of gold that nearly blinded approaching visitors. 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish historian Josephus wrote that the gold on the temple "reflected so fierce a blaze of fire that those who tried to look at it were forced to turn away.... It seemed in the distance like a mountain covered in snow, for any part not covered in gold was dazzling white."

It was a building meant to last for the ages. But it didn't. In 70 AD, Rome sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the great Temple. People were murdered in the streets; the holy items were tossed away and destroyed. And when all that was done, then the site was profaned, a common practice in the Ancient World, meant to completely humiliate the people. Sometimes holy sites were even used as latrines. Imagine this room turned into a public toilet. One day, the Temple stood gleaming in the sun. The next day, it was a smoky ruin.

One day our own great Temple of Commerce, the World Trade Center, stood gleaming in the sun. The next day it was a smoky ruin. And on that day we knew something of the terror that is far too common in this world, and has been for most of human history.

Last week you'll remember that Jesus commended a poor widow who gave her last two cents to the Temple Treasury. The Gospel lesson today is a continuation of that story. Jesus and company were leaving the Temple when one of the disciples, overcome by its grandeur blurted out: "Wow, just look at this place." He no doubt expected Jesus to be impressed too. What a shock it must have been to hear Jesus say: "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left on top of the other. All will be thrown down."

Well, this put a damper on their spirits and so no one dared to raise the issue of what he meant until they were out of town, sitting on the Mount of Olives, with its bird's eye view of the Temple. Finally a few of them screwed up their courage and asked: "So Jesus, when will this awfulness happen?" And Jesus didn't exactly answer the question. Instead, he replied: *"Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. 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. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs."* Maybe someone should have told Jesus to lighten up!

This passage is an example of apocalyptic literature, a way of speaking about the end of time. We don't understand this literature very well, being separated as we are, by culture and time. And in some cases this misunderstanding is exacerbated by coded language. In many cases, we no longer have the codes. In addition, some of us scoff at ancient superstitions about the end of the world, whether they're found in Nostradamus or the Bible. And so we read passages like this one and think them strange. Well, they are strange, but they are not unfamiliar. We may not be looking for the end of the world, but we sure know what it feels like to think your world is ending. Maybe some of you felt that on September 11. For others it was a call from the doctor's office with bad news or the end of a great love affair or the death of someone you loved or the recent destruction of your stock portfolio. Apocalyptic language may be foreign to us, but apocalyptic living is not.

Some Christians claim that following Jesus will exempt you from the sorts of terrors Jesus said we should expect. Huge ministries have been built around the idea that God wants you to have your best life now. How completely American. I wonder what happens to the folks who believe that when their lives too become apocalyptic.

Well, this passage contains no such promise. Rather, it is a blunt warning about how hard and unpredictable and unfair that life can be: wars and rumors of wars, nation against nation, earthquakes, famines, natural disasters.

And yet, in the middle of all this fright, Jesus says: “Don’t be alarmed. Don’t be scared.” It’s almost like a throw-away line; very easy to miss if you’re not paying attention. But to miss this is to actually miss the Gospel.

Don’t be alarmed. Fear not. Some people claim that derivatives of this phrase occur 365 times in the Bible – one for every day of the year. I think that’s an overstatement, but it is not an overstatement to say that not giving into fear is a resounding theme of the Bible. James Forbes, former pastor of the Riverside Church, claims that FEAR NOT is *the* theme of the Bible.

I think he might be right. Throughout the Bible’s pages, angels appear to frightened, terrorized people and the first words they speak are “Fear not!” The Risen Jesus appeared to his terrified friends, who had witnessed his execution and were running for their lives, and the first words he spoke were “Peace be with you.”

When Jesus said, “don’t be alarmed” in the midst of his own unsettling prediction that life was about to get a lot harder, he actually wasn’t saying anything novel. He was reminding his followers of the faith they already knew. Jewish faith and the Christianity that grew from it do not see history as circular or random or meaningless. Instead, we see history as linear, as having an end point, a purpose, a culmination. Therefore, this life of ours is not all madness. The God who created us is also the God who saves us. That is part of what it means when we say “Christ will come again.” To say that Christ will come again is to stand against the chaos of the world and declare that chaos is not our final destination. God made us for something better. Christ will come again.

When I was in college, the Cold War was still raging. The Soviet Union had invaded Poland. Talk of a draft and potential nuclear annihilation were in the air. And lots of us were scared. I took a New Testament class that semester that had a lasting effect on my life. It’s funny I should say that since I don’t remember much of what Dr. Helyer had to say. Well, except for one thing he said. It was the last day of the semester and we were talking about current events and the culture of fear that existed. Dr. Helyer listened intently to us and finally in a calm and measured voice, and with the authority of someone

who had walked with God for awhile, he said: "Remember that even if this republic should collapse around us, should everything we know come to ruin, the Reign of God will stand." It was a moment of grace for me; a moment of understanding. And despite the fearful atmosphere, I had peace. The circumstances of the world had not changed. I was still draft age. War was still possible. Dr. Helyer simply reminded me of that essential truth that I can still forget: the future may be out of our hands, but it is not out of God's. And the God who holds the future also holds us, come hell or high water.

These are not the empty, easy words of the pious or the simple-minded or people living in denial. Quite frankly, there is nothing easy about these words. People sometimes think you're crazy when you believe these words. But so many of us have known them to be true. We have known that hope that comes to us unbidden; that refuses to die even when we stand among the smoky ruins of our lives.

The road we travel is not easy. It is not free of danger and terror. But the promise of the Gospel is that this road we're on actually leads somewhere – somewhere good. We'll get there in one piece. Christ will come again. So, don't be alarmed. Fear not. Peace be with you.