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Mark 13: 1-8
"The Divine Builder"

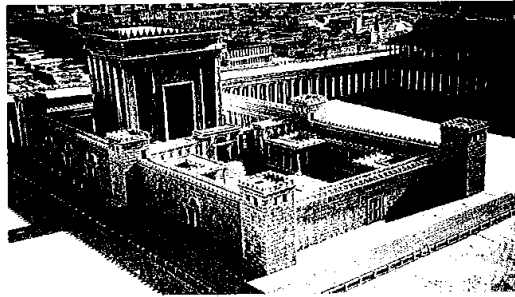
13As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!' ²Then Jesus asked him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'

³ When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?' ⁵Then Jesus began to say to them, 'Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁶Many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and they will lead many astray. ⁷When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. ⁸For 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 birth pangs.

Picture the most impressive building you've ever seen. Just think of it for a moment. Maybe it's a monument, or a tower, or a skyscraper.

No doubt the temple in Jerusalem looked to be the most impressive building ever seen to many of the disciples with Jesus the day they walked the temple court. A bit of a history lesson is in order. "According to Jewish tradition and scripture, the First Temple was built by King Solomon the son of King David in 957 BCE and destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. The second was constructed under the auspices of Zerubbabel in 516 BCE and destroyed by the Roman Empire in 70 CE."¹ What the disciples marveled over that day was the 2nd temple which had been substantially enlarged and made grand by King Herod the Great. It would have been clad in marble and gilded. It would have towered over any other structure and have been seen for miles around in the surrounding countryside. It was truly a grand building.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple_Mount. Accessed Nov 16, 2018.



What the disciples could not have known, and what Jesus foretold, was that after a Jewish revolt in 70 AD, and the following Roman suppression of the revolt and brutal backlash, the temple would indeed be torn down to its foundations, such that, "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." Just as Jesus had warned the disciples.

It was most impressive building in Jewish life. It was the center of worship and religious life. It was very place where it was said the feet of God rested on a footstool in the altar of the holies of holies, and it would soon be utterly destroyed, and each stone knocked off the other. Modern Jews even today gather near the rubble of the temple, at a place called the "Wailing" or Western Wall and remember the grandeur of the temple and offer prayers.

Earlier I asked you to recall or imagine seeing the grandest building you could think of in all its splendor. Now imagine if you could fast-forward 10,000 years into the future. Would it still be there? Or would odds be that it would be crumbled into dust due to neglect, disaster, or obsolescence? I watched an interesting program a few years back that speculated what the world would look like if civilization were to end and we were to fast forward thousands of years. The sad news is that not much would remain, except stainless steel odds and ends.

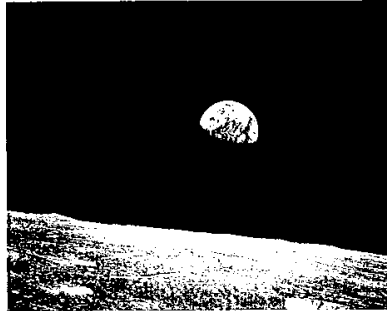
You see, I think this little encounter between Jesus and the disciples was all about Jesus trying to teach the disciples something. Something about human hubris and the place of humankind in the order of God's good creation. We can build the grandest temple and declare it the footstool of God. We can build a towering skyscraper to touch the clouds. We can build massive stone pyramids that persist for 5,000 years, but all of these, even the pyramids will eventually pass away. I think Jesus was trying to give the disciples some perspective, to help

them know that at the end of it all, when it is all said and done, it's out of our control. Some things are just in God's hands.

That's the insight I get from reading the entirety of Mark 13. Called the "mini-apocalypse" by Bible scholars, the verses describe a dark vision of the end of times. When the world erupts into chaos and earthquakes and violence. Over the years many have tried to capitalize on the fear and control gained by trying to predict the exact timing of these end times, only to be proven false over and over again. They manage to convince a group of followers that they have special insight or prophecy into the exact timing of the end of days. They gather these followers together, often in isolated conclaves and await the coming apocalypse. We know that they've been wrong every single time. These are probably the ones that Jesus warned the disciples of when he said in v 6, "Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray." 16th century theologian John Calvin, the father of the Presbyterian theological tradition was so suspicious of these types that he refused to argue matters of the end of days, insisting that it was idle speculation. In fact, if you read ahead to the end of chapter 13, Jesus is insistent that "32 'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.'" All he can warn the disciples, truly, is to, "33 Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come." (Mark 13: 32-33).

What this serves to do is to give us a grander perspective, and to stretch our understanding. Because, as I mentioned earlier, despite the fact that we humans can do and build marvelous things: we can split the atom, we can orbit the earth and moon, we can build mighty bridges and towering buildings, how much control do we really have? Maybe Jesus was taking the camera of our viewpoints and widening the aperture a bit?

I want to share a photo with you, it's fair to say that this is one of the most famous pictures of the past century:



It's called, "Earthrise," and it was taken out of the window of the Apollo 8 on Christmas Eve 1968 by astronaut Bill Anders. Think about this picture for a moment, for it contains every human being in existence. It was the ultimate family photo! Nobody had to move to the left so you could see their face, they're all there.

The Apollo crew was so moved by the experience of seeing the Earth for the first time from the orbit of the moon, which just so happened to coincide with Christmas Eve that they began to read some well known passages of scripture. On a public broadcast, said to have reached the largest audience ever for that time, the astronauts read from the book of Genesis chapter 1, the first 10 verses of the story of creation, "1In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. 3Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. 4And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. 5God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day." (Genesis 1: 1).

Because as marvelous as it was that these three men had ridden a controlled explosion in a towering rocket and thundered through space around the moon at 24,000 mph, these humans had gained a unique perspective. And that new perspective was one of awe and wonder: Awe at the majesty of God, and wonder at God's good creation. I've always puzzled over the Proverb from Proverbs 10: 9, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." But thinking of the Apollo astronauts that day, I think that the fear of the Lord – the reverence of God, the deep awareness of God's majesty is what moved them, and created a

moment of crystal clear wisdom and understanding. They had a moment, a “spot” if you will, where they experienced the majesty of God.

I’ve had some fun this past week asking this question of a bunch of you, “where is your spot? Where is the spot you think of when you feel close to God? Where you feel the presence of God all around you? Where you marvel at the majesty of God?” It was a delight to hear your answers. I heard about lakes and lakeshores. I heard about a special tree or grove of trees. I heard about a mountain range, or the North shore waterfalls and cliffs. And many more. It delighted me to hear your stories. One of you even had so much fun with this exercise that you even sent me a picture of your favorite spot:



But I realized that the resolution on the picture wasn't the greatest, so I got on my computer and fixed it a bit, and this is what I came up with after many hours of sharpening contrast and color balance:



All kidding aside, what jumped out to me the most was that none of you mentioned a man made place when naming your “spots”. There were no buildings, skyscrapers, bridges, or houses. Every one of you spoke of something marvelous in God’s good creation. And isn’t that any marvel? Which one of us, even if given all the resources in the world, could craft a mighty sequoia tree?

Which one of us, could cause the cells to divide, to create the light to shine, to build the soil, and has the patience to wait 300 years for it to grow? Which one of us could craft the lake and its mighty waves crashing on Superior's shores? And fill it with flashing salmon darting through its waters.

Only God. Only God can do these things, and each of them is a marvel in comparison to our mightiest skyscraper or temple whose stones will be only fall with the ages.

So, how are to respond to this awareness of the great majesty and provenance of God? How are we to respond to the awareness that we are given this great, good, marvelous creation to enjoy at God's good will and pleasure?

The first would be to live with an awareness that we are all, from the greatest to the least of us, living lives of utter dependence on God. That we are God's. That all that we have, and all that we are, is the result of God's good loving Grace. That our existence is a gift. That this world we inhabit is a gift. And because of that, we are to treat it, and each other with tender loving care.

The second, would be this, to lay stones for God's glory. To be builder's for God. If we are to build, build. But do it for God's glory. If we are to plant, plant. But do it for God's glory. Sing for God's glory. Pray for God's glory. Serve for God's glory. Work for God's glory.

Live lives like the great hymnwriter Robert Robinson reminded us, in 1758, when he composed his classic hymn, "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing." It was a song that commemorated a great victory of the prophet Samuel and the Israelites over the Philistines, when following the battle, Samuel was so moved by the provenance of God for bringing them safely through the battle that he prayed and offered sacrifices, it's said in 1 Samuel 7: 12, "Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen, and called its name Ebenezer, saying, 'Thus far the Lord has helped us' " (1 Samuel 7:12)." An Ebenezer, a "stone of help."

2. Here I raise mine Ebenezer;
hither by thy help I'm come;
and I hope, by thy good pleasure,
safely to arrive at home.
Jesus sought me when a stranger,
wandering from the fold of God;

he, to rescue me from danger,
interposed his precious blood.

May we, too, realize that hither by God's help we've come, by his good
pleasure we live and move and have our being. And may we live lives like Samuel,
laying stones for God's glory. May it be so.

Alleluia and Amen.