

We're Our Own Problem

1 Samuel 2:8a-b Abba God raises up the poor from the dust; Abba God lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.

Introduction

Our relationship with our ideologies will be the end of us.

I know that's not the greatest way to begin a sermon in a place that should bring comfort, but it is the truthiest way I know how to begin. (This place is as much about comfort as it is about truth.) While I think there are good ideologies and worse ones, the reality is—and to quote last week's sermon—***we do this***. There are ideas we have and ideals we strive for; then there is the calcification of those ideas and ideals that we turn into ideologies; ***we do this***. They aren't inherently embedded in the universe, waiting for our exploration and discovery. Let's go on a thought journey: imagine earth making its way about the sun without humanity anywhere. In this image, what is happening on the face of the earth? Flora is flora-ing, fauna is fauna-ing, Things get warm, things get cold; things enter night while things enter day. Things are just going. Are animals fighting, sure. Are trees dying because of beetles, sure. But it's all just going, organically, day in and day out.

At no point in that image is there a discussion about “good” and “evil”, of “progress” and “conserving”, of “individual” and “communal”, of “this” and “not that”. Why? Because we bring that stuff into the mix. To be clear, I'm not arguing for a human-less world; I very much enjoy my time here as a human, doing all my human things. I'm also not arguing that those discussions, dialogues, and dialectics aren't important; don't forget, I'm a theologian and political ethicist, my academic career depends on such things be engaged with and vigorously. But what I want you to see is that part of being human is making and creating systems and structures that reflect ***ourselves*** into the world, materializing what ***we*** hold most dear. Did you catch that emphasis? What ***WE*** hold most dear, how ***WE*** see the world, what ***WE*** think is best. Every philosophy, theology, ethical program, religious expression carries a certain amount of personal bias that then resonates with others experiencing the world. Every. One.

The problem is that we don't see these ideologies as things we make, like tables and chairs. We see them as parts of us worth defending as if our lives depended on it. Here, three things

happen, a). (individually) we lose ourselves to them (as in, they become a part of our personhood, being, and identity); b). (corporately) we lose the number one thing that makes us most human: relationships with others, with our kin and with our neighbor (as in, we will cling to ideologies harder than we will cling to each other because we have allowed them to define us more than our relationships); and c). because we have invested so much in these ideologies, we can't let them be wrong because then we become bad (as in, we've succumbed to the false binary that right=good and wrong=bad). In other words, too close an identification with what we believe to be **the** way will mean that we lose others and in losing others we lose ourselves. In other, other words, we lose our humanity and let the very things we created have domination over us, and we are thrust back into captivity; our ideologies are none other than immaterial golden calves causing us to curve in on ourselves more and more, forsaking our neighbor, thus forsaking God. We will become so turned in on ourselves that we won't even know God's left the building.

Mark 13:1-8

And then, while they were leaving out of the temple, one of [Jesus's] disciples says to Jesus, "Teacher, behold(!), how magnificent the enormous blocks of stone and how magnificent the sanctuary!!" And Jesus said to him, "See these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left stone upon stone, not one at all(!); all will be overthrown."

Mark opens chapter thirteen with Jesus *leaving* the temple—the one he's been in for a while teaching. This *leaving* functions in two ways: 1. it provides a conclusion to the teaching of the disciples that has been ongoing for chapters now; and 2. Jesus physically severs his connection with the temple (he's not thrown out; he leaves as the "unquestioned winner in the contest").¹ In other words, Mark sets up an important visual for his audience: God is leaving the building (recall Mk. 1:1).

¹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC, eds. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 494. "...already in 12:1-12 and increasingly since 12:34...Jesus has taken the initiative, posing the next question himself (without receiving a reply) and going on to denounce the representatives of religious power and to overturn conventional values of importance and status. It is thus appropriate that the whole episode ends not with the authorities taking action against Jesus...but with Jesus now the unquestioned winner in the contest, himself severing the connection by leaving the temple and pronouncing its down fall."

As Jesus and his disciples are leaving the temple, one of them (who goes unnamed) marvels, to Jesus, about how magnificent the building is and the stones! *“Teacher, behold(!), how magnificent the enormous blocks of stone and how magnificent the sanctuary!!”* These structures were fantastically remarkable, the place you’d go if you’re touring about Jerusalem. One scholar explains, the temple “occupied a platform of over 900 by 1,500 feet, and the front of the temple building itself stood 150 feet tall and 150 feet wide, made of white stone, much of it covered with silver and gold”; don’t forget, his disciples aren’t city mice, they’re country mice²—what they witnessed firsthand as the sun played with the precious metals, stones, and cuts was truly marvelous and awe inspiring.³ But even though a building is remarkable and speaks to the beautiful ingenuity of human minds and hands (and conjures horrifying images of the many oppressed bodies that were used to build it...), and even if it is dedicated to the most upright purposes, it doesn’t mean that somehow God is trapped therein, obligated to reside (forever) among the stone and precious metals.

So, Jesus says, *“See these great buildings/sanctuaries? Not one stone here will be left stone upon stone, not one at all(!); all will be overthrown.”* What the unnamed disciple saw as magnificent, Jesus sees as the cite of God’s revolution of love, life and liberation in the world. For Mark’s Jesus, there’s nothing of the temple that is glorifying to God;⁴ rather, it’s a testament to human glory, and the leadership therein is dead set on their one way to do things, the one way that brings them the most power and the most glory (remember Mk. 12:38-44). Like the pharisees in other instances and the scribes just before this, this is nothing but a well decorated tomb of human made ideologies⁵ destroying God’s beloved, oppressing

² France, *Mark*, 496. “The unnamed disciple’s admiration of the temple buildings would be typical of a Galilean visitor to Jerusalem.”

³ William C. Placher, *Mark*, *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, eds Amy Plantinga Pauw and William C. Placher. (Louisville: WJK, 2010), 184-185. “It is understandable that Jesus’ disciples, mostly from the countryside, would have been impressed by the temple Herod had built. It occupied a platform of over 900 by 1,500 feet, and the front of the temple building itself stood 150 feet tall and 150 feet wide, made of white stone, much of it covered with silver and gold, by far the most impressive building any of them had seen, glowing in the sunlight. Little wonder they were amazed by it all—and then little wonder at Jesus’ frustration that they had not yet understood his teaching that God was not present in him and not in the temple.”

⁴ France, *Mark*, 496. “Splendid as the structure may be, its time is over.”

⁵ France, *Mark*, 494. “The unnamed disciple’s superficial admiration for the magnificence of the buildings, contrasted with Jesus’ declaration of their ultimate bankruptcy, furnishes yet another example of the

them, tearing them apart, rendering them grist for the mill of the corrupted authority. As Jesus leaves the temple and promises its destruction, he emphasizes that the temple is going to be replaced with something new.⁶

Jesus then, according to Mark, goes to the Mount of Olives and sits down. It's assumed he leaves the temple by the east gate. The imagery here would not have been lost on the original audience, but it might be lost on us. Mark is harkening back to the book of Ezekial and God's abandonment of the temple through the east gate and resting on the mountain to the east of the city.⁷ Thus, Mark positions Jesus going out of the east gate to the Mount of Olives and sitting down opposite the temple (a position of judgment).⁸ According to Jesus, Jerusalem and the temple are no longer the primary focus of the divine government.⁹ God has (definitely) left the building.

And the next part of our passage is Jesus's cryptic reply to Peter's question (on behalf of James, John, and Andrew) that speaks to "the end of the old order."¹⁰ Peter asks, *"Answer for us when these things will be, and what the sign [will be] whenever all these things will intend to be accomplished."* Jesus's response is a (prophetic¹¹) litany of various wars and skirmishes, lies

reorientation to the new perspective of the kingdom of God to which the disciples are committed but which they remain slow to grasp, and which Mark expects his readers to embrace."

⁶ France, *Mark*, 494. "The old structure of authority in which God's relationship with his people has hitherto been focused, is due for replacement...As Mt. 12:6 has it, 'Something greater than the temple is here'. The discourse which will follow in vv. 5-37 will fill out the nature of that 'something greater'."

⁷ France, *Mark*, 494.

⁸ France, *Mark*, 495. "Moreover, he goes from the temple onto the Mount of Olives (v. 3), presumably leaving by the east gate. it does not take a very profound knowledge of the Book of Ezekiel to recall the dramatic description of God's abandonment of his temple as the chariot throne of God's glory rises up from inside the temple, pauses at the east gate, and comes to rest on 'the mountain east of the city' (Ezk. 10:18-19; 11:22-23). So now again the divine presence is withdrawn from the temple, and it is left to its destruction."

⁹ France, *Mark*, 497-498. "The mutual hostility between Jesus and the Jerusalem establishment has now reached its culmination in Jesus' open prediction of the destruction of the temple, with its powerful symbolism of the end of the existing order and the implication that something new is to take its place. This is to be a time of unprecedented upheaval in the life and leadership of the people of God. Jerusalem, and the temple which is the focus of its authority, is about to lose its central role in God's economy. "the βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ, is to find a new focus."

¹⁰ France, *Mark*, 498.

¹¹ France, *Mark*, 508. "What we know from Josephus of the forty years or so between Jesus' ministry and the destruction of the temple amply illustrates these warnings."

and deceits, none of which are literal signs that are predictions; Jesus knows that his disciples will be prone to being misled by wars, rivalries between nations and kingdoms, and even by false messiahs.¹² Rather, these things will happen not because they are signaling something divine (the collapse of the temple) but because they are the fruit of humans being human; we cause wars, we intentionally deceive others, we allow our anthropocentric megalomania to dare to believe we can save ourselves (politically and spiritually). **WE DO THIS!** The collapse of the temple is because of human intoxication with itself; the temple will collapse under the weight of human made ideologies and God's refusal to be held captive by them. As we said last week, *Unless Abba God builds the house, their labor is in vain who build it. Unless Abba God watches over the city, in vain the watcher keeps their vigil.*

But Jesus doesn't leave them without hope. For Jesus, part of the economy of the kingdom of God is that death precedes life, just as incredible trial and pain precede the birthing of new life.¹³ The promised destruction of the temple is but one of those things that will liberate the people into something new¹⁴ and the disciples need not get caught up in conspiracy theories

¹² France, *Mark*, 508. "The disciples, and those who following them will read these words, are called to discernment and warned against the sort of superficial impressions of 'fulfillment' which have been the bane of students of apocalyptic and eschatological literature ever since. Sometimes false impressions are self-inflicted, as people naively read off from world events the 'signs of the end' (vv.7-8). Sometimes, however, they are deliberately fostered by those who have something to gain by working on the credulity of the faithful (vv. 5-6). Jesus' disciples will be liable to both kinds of misinformation as they look for the fulfilment of his words about the destruction of the temple. They must be on their guard."

¹³ France, *Mark*, 509. "There is a birth to be looked forward to, but the wars, earthquakes, and famines of vv. 7-8 show only that it is coming, not when it will come. Even to speak of a birth at all is perhaps to press the metaphor too far, in that such an expression as ὥδινες τοῦ θανάτου does not seem to envisage a birth, only pain; but as the discourses proceeds, we shall see that the coming destruction of the temple will bring with it a new beginning."

¹⁴ France, *Mark*, 509. "The answer given to the disciples' questions in the first four verses of the discourse is thus a negative one, clearing away the natural tendency to look for signs of the temple's destruction in the stirring and ominous events of the coming years, in the areas both of politics and of natural disaster. The disciples must not allow themselves to be misled. They will have enough to do to maintain their own witness to the truth through these difficult days..."

and false messiahs¹⁵. They are to stay the course,¹⁶ they will need to keep their head about them and refuse the temptation to be driven and controlled by cultic conspiracies. They must fix their eyes on something else, some one else who came to liberate them—yesterday, today, and tomorrow.¹⁷ And it is this fixed focus on Jesus, the source of love, life, and liberation that the disciples will participate in liberating all of God's beloved from captivity (to the temple, to religion, to philosophy, to theology, to dogma, to doctrine, to law, to themselves, to their power, privilege, and prestige) into real liberation that brings with it robust love (for God and for the neighbor), vibrant new life focused on pulling together and not apart, uplifting and not tearing down, listening and not dismissing. Here in, in this pulling together, in this community, in this solidarity within humanity is the temple to be found.

Conclusion

If you're tempted to think this is a first century Palestinian problem, please think again.¹⁸ The Church, the Christian Church, the American Christian Church is not the new temple; we are as at risk of turning this building into an empty tomb as our ancient siblings. The new temple will always be in Christ and where Christ goes; and it will be those who follow Christ (by faith and in action) who live within the new temple of the reign of God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is these who will be with Christ who bring Christ to others and participate in God's diving mission of the righteous revolution of love, life, and liberation.

So, for us here today, Beloved, we need liberation, we need interruption, we need to get our heads on straight. We must heed the words of Christ to his disciples and think clear and smart and always choose that which brings much love, that which produces the most life, and that which causes the greatest amount of liberation—about these we must also be adamant, these

¹⁵ France, *Mark*, 510. Those claiming to act in Jesus's name, "So we must assume some meagre contextual guidance is that they were not so much claiming to act on Jesus' authority as in fact aiming to usurp his place, not by claiming to be Jesus *redivivus* (surely too far-fetched a concept in this context) but by arrogating to themselves the role which was rightly his, that of Messiah..."

¹⁶ France, *Mark*, 511. "The disciples are to be calm and not to jump to hasty conclusions."

¹⁷ Placher, *Mark*, 185. "They want to know what is going to happen, and Jesus says that many terrible things will happen (a safe bet in first-century Palestine), but that they should not jump to the conclusion that bad times announce the immediate end of the present age."

¹⁸ Placher, *Mark*, 185. "Christians in any period who see the end at hand need to remember that such predications came within a generation of Jesus' death and have been coming, on and off, ever since."

are our guiding ideas and ideals, these are our drives and motivations. If our ideologies cannot do that or have stopped, we must—**must**—choose love, life, and liberation over our ideologies...we don't have a choice; God's about to leave the building, if God hasn't already left.