

# We Walk by Faith

Sermon by Pastor Patrick Fish

Mark 13:1-8

November 17-18, 2018

*Grace and peace to you from Christ, whose power has set us free from our past. Whose promises ground us in the present. And whose presence give us hope for our future. Amen.*

## **Move 1: First day of Seminary**

I still remember my first class in seminary. I was terrified. Still wondering if I was cut out to be a Christian public leader.

I didn't know anyone, so I did what all true Lutherans do: I sat down in the last row of the classroom. The class was Church Hymnody. All first years had to take it. So there were about fifty of us in that class. Paul Westermeyer was the professor. He introduced himself and the teacher's assistant for the class.

And he shared that he wanted to get a sense of who we are. So, the teacher's assistant passed out a one-page sheet for us to fill out about ourselves. They were all questions relating to our musical background.

Could you read music?

What instrument do you play?

What is your vocal range?

These sorts of questions. Well, I don't sing well. My range is "only should sing in the shower." I never played an instrument. Marked 'not applicable' for that question. Never learned to read music. No there. Okay, I was all done.

I realized I was the first one done. Everyone else was writing down their extensive musical experience and abilities.

The professor collected all the papers from everyone. He paged through them and then said, "Okay, just to be clear, is there anyone besides Pat Fish who cannot read music?"

First day, first class, thanks to Paul Westermeyer, I had a great reputation. Awesome. Really helped my confidence and discernment about being a pastor.

I ended up having to have special lessons with the teacher's assistant. At first, I thought this was the worst. But God is funny. It ended up being best thing that could have happened.

I learned how to chant. Learned the basics so that I could somewhat read music from a hymnal. I at least knew now if I should sing low or high.

But what I gained was more than just the practical musical skills. The teacher's assistant's name was Dustin. He may never remember me. He probably has no idea the impact he had on me. But he did.

He is and will always be one of the rocks that got me to this point.

One day, I was sharing with Dustin how conflicted I was on whether I was doing the right thing in becoming a pastor. I didn't know if I was good enough. I had seen some of the other students; they seemed better than me. further ahead in their knowledge of scripture and faith.

Dustin paused, and then he said, "Pat, all God wants us to be is faithful. Be faithful to God. Be faithful to the person God created you to be. Don't measure yourself by anything else."

I'll never forget that. Faithfulness.

From that day, I stopped measuring myself in terms of bigger, better, grander. I dug in on discerning how to be my authentic self who faithfully followed God's Word. Who walked not by fear—but who walked by faith in Christ.

## **Move 2: Who do we follow**

As people, we are drawn to power. To grandeur. To splendor. To greatness.

And we often measure ourselves accordingly. We measure our worth by our achievements and accomplishments. By the type of house, car, and lifestyle we have. By how many friends on Snapchat and likes on Facebook we have.

Bigger. Better. Larger.

This is true today. It was true 2,000 years ago.

In today's Gospel reading we hear Jesus' wisdom that God is not drawn to splendor or large stones. His criteria for following him is not bigger and better but faithfulness. [1] He warns us not to get caught up in the grandiose. To not be deceived. By big buildings. By people who project they are better and preach in absolutes.

We follow Christ, who is always faithful. We trust in God, who always follows through and is faithful to God's promises.

God doesn't promise us a perfect life. God promises us a life where God will always be present. With us.

Although death and darkness persists in this world, we resist. We stand with courage. We walk with strength. And we do not succumb to fear. We walk by faith. For the Lord God will be with us always. Wherever we go, we know we can always trust in God's faithfulness.

### **Move 3: Scripture**

In our Gospel for today, we are invited into a private conversation between Jesus and his inner circle. This interaction comes directly at the heels of the story about the faithful, loyal widow. Last week, we read and heard Jesus lift up the widow. He celebrated her generosity and devotion to serving the church.

Ironic. Jesus lifts up the marginalized; yet in today's Gospel, the disciples lift up magnificence and might.

One disciple is mesmerized at the splendor of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. And he says to Jesus, "Look, what large stones and what large buildings."

This disciple, like all of us, is drawn and captured by greatness.

For Jesus, the Temple and the widow are connected. He recognizes that huge buildings like the Temple were constructed off the blood, sweat and tears of the poor. Large stones were built by exploiting the least of these, like the widow.

"Oppression, exploitation, abuse of the widow, orphan, migrant, transgender people." [2] These injustices at the hands of those in power to build for themselves large buildings and large stones, God will not stand.

Jesus shares no stone will go unturned. All these stones built through abuse and exploitation will fall. Oppressive systems and structures will be made anew. [3]

Jesus prepares his followers—past, present, and future—on how to be resilient and endure the realities of life. Change and uncertainty are inevitable. As individuals, we will experience turmoil at some point. As churches, the same holds true.

Life is never all bad. Nor all good. It's a mixture of both. The difference for us, as followers of the Way, is that we stay steady in all life's ups and downs. We don't whip back and forth. We stay steady for we are led by God's faithfulness.

We don't get too up. For when life is good, we give thanks to God. We don't get too down, either. For when life is bad, we cling, like Ruth and Naomi did to one another, to the God who promises to be our rock. Forever and always.

Many scholars agree the Gospel of Mark was written right after the time of the destruction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

Imagine the people who heard this for the first time. They are displaced. Wondering how to make sense of this. Jesus is speaking directly to them. He is also speaking directly to us. Who are trying to make sense of our world.

And in the midst whatever chaos we may be experiencing, in the backdrop of the temple's destruction, Christ brings words of hope: "This is but the beginning of the birth pangs."

"It's easy to forget that this apocalyptic passage doesn't end with gloom and doom." [4] Jesus isn't ignoring the war, conflict, deception, and natural disasters that we might experience in this life. But, here, Jesus faces all of them and gives us words of hope to take them on.

"Jesus is speaking about a hopeful future. We all know pain. Some have actually experienced the physical pain of giving birth. After the most powerful forces of pain take place, birth is the result. New life is the result." [5]

Labor pain is a great analogy for the movement faith takes us. When my wife and I went to parent classes, they called labor pains "productive pain." Easy for me to say because I didn't have to experience any of those productive pains. But what our nurse was teaching us is correct; The pain in labor is doing something. It's productive. Moving a child out into the world. Creating new life.

We rest our faith in knowing that God is always doing the same in our world. Productively moving the world—its people, systems, and structures—to new life. Changing us so our lives more align and reflect the love we first receive from our faithful God.

So that we are less drawn to large buildings. And more drawn to being rocks to the widow in our midst.

#### **Move 4: Evelyn**

I shared earlier about a rock in my life, Dustin.

Another rock in my life is a woman I met while I was serving as pastor at my first call. Her name was Evelyn.

Earlier this year, Evelyn died. She had battled cancer for the last twelve years. Yet she never stopped living her life. She always had a smile on her face. And she never stopped serving God.

Every year, she would knit hats and scarves for the local shelter. She ran our Angel Tree program that collected items for children. She was a servant and never lost sight of that despite her cancer.

Whenever she would receive a treatment and I would go see her, she would have no energy. Yet she would still always say, "Not gonna let this beat me or bring me down."

I would always tell her it's okay to be mad at God. To yell at God. God can take it.

Like wanting her to get mad because Lord knows I would be. Yet she never would.

She would just tell me how good God has been. How blessed her life was.

Her courage was infectious. Her faith was contagious.

I always told her she was my pastor and not the other way around.

During my second year serving at my first call congregation, my grandfather passed away. He passed away on Good Friday. I was devastated and wondered how I was going to preach on Easter.

That Saturday, I got a phone call. It was Evelyn.

She asked if she could come drop something off for me. I said sure.

She came by the church. And she handed me a rock. On the rock was written the Bible reference "Joshua 1:9"

She then told me the verse:

Be strong and courageous.  
Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged,  
for the Lord God will be with you wherever you go.

I asked what this was all for. She expressed her condolences for my grandfather. And told me to hold onto that rock to give me strength for the days and weeks ahead. "Rub it when you are struggling and remember God is faithful."

I still have that rock. All these years later.

### **Move 5: Rock**

Each of you were handed a rock upon coming into the sanctuary. Those are yours to keep.

May your rock be a sign for you as it was for me. A sign of God's faithfulness that will join with you when you are struggling.

And if an opportunity presents itself, pass the stone onto someone else. Look for opportunities God is drawing you to help the widow, orphan, stranger, and least of these in your midst.

For this I know: God has never, is not, and will never stand idly by while abuse, exploitation, and oppression exist. God is working through the Church. Through you. Through me. Through us. To bring about new life.

God has been present in all our ups and downs. God has been present during every mountaintop and during every valley here at St. Mark's. God's promises and presence link our past, our present, and our future. [6]

As we celebrate all God has done at St. Mark's in 2018 and look ahead at our vision for 2019, our mission is the same: remain steadfast and secure in God's faithfulness and respond by sharing Christ's abundant love with each other and the world.

Amen.

### Resources

[1] Lewis, Karoline. "Storied Stones," DearWorkingPreacher, workingpreacher.org. November 15, 2015.

[2] Cruz, Samuel. "Commentary on Mark 13:1-8," workingpreacher.org. November 18, 2018.

[3] Cruz. "Commentary on Mark 13:1-8."

[4] Cruz. "Commentary on Mark 13:1-8."

[5] Cruz. "Commentary on Mark 13:1-8."

[6] "The Way of Faithfulness," *Season of Creation*, November 18, 2018.

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### Reflection Questions

- *How has faith sustained you in times of struggle?*
- *Why do you think society seems fixated on knowing the future, about the end times, and what heaven will be like?*
- *Where do you experience God's presence most fully?*