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Friday, November 16, 2012  
Year B, Proper 28

1 Samuel 2:1-20  
Hebrews 10:11-25  
Mark 13:1-8

## Permanence amidst the impermanent

- I will never forget the first time I got to walk around in a big city
  - It was Chicago, and Katy and I were there for a couple of job interviews for her as we prepared to move to seminary
    - Somehow this was 12 years ago!
  - I had been to DC before, but only in tour groups, rushed in and out of the museums and monuments
  - And I had flown into large cities, and driven through them
  - But this was the first time we walked the streets just to see the sights
  - This old Arkansas boy was in awe of the 96 story buildings
  - And the green spaces in the middle of the city
  - And the history that was there, celebrated and remembered, unlike the small town I grew up in
  - Right in the middle of modern downtown Chicago is the old water tower that predated the Chicago fire of 1871
  - It was all so grand- and I certainly remember walking around, looking up, wearing the tourist face
  - And then there are other monuments, places, that make Chicago look like a toddler
  - Stonehenge, Grand Canyon, Chin Chen Itza- and Egyptian pyramids are on my bucket list
  - How small they make me feel, in a very good way, and how such things would last many of my lifetimes
  - I completely understand what the disciples felt as they looked around at the temple in Jerusalem- you can just imagine them
  - Small town fishermen, most of them
  - The temple was their version of history, grandness, and provided a feeling of security knowing the temple had always been there
  - And would be their for their children and grandchildren

- It was a testament to the Jewish peoples' permanence, their survival as a culture, even in the midst of Roman rule
- Much like our monuments, and our major cities: they provide a feeling of stability and longevity
- That is exactly why we build them- to create something that will last a long time into the future
- While there is nothing wrong with the buildings themselves, today's lessons warn us not to place our hope in them
- If we want to make a lasting mark, an eternal one, not one that fades with time, Jesus tells us how
- The reality, then, is that what we see and take for granted is impermanent
  - And for the disciples and the temple, it was especially so
  - The disciples were like me in the city: they were impressed with the beauty, the majesty, and the seeming permanence of the temple
  - Jesus then shares some shocking news: he tells them that no stone will be left upon another
  - All will be thrown down.
  - Some scholars believe Jesus was speaking in response to the statue of Caesar that the priests were being forced to erect in the temple walls<sup>1</sup>
    - There were troops moving into the region right about the time Jesus would have been speaking to enforce this new edict
    - And when the Roman military was deployed, destruction often followed to keep everyone under control
  - Or perhaps Jesus was referring to the soon-to-come destruction of the temple
    - In only forty or so years after Jesus said this, the temple was in fact destroyed *again*
  - And still, other interpretations suggest that Jesus is looking even further into the future, and is commenting on a larger scale
  - Perhaps even regarding all buildings and human creations
  - That one day they will no longer be here: one day everything will be different
  - One thing is sure: Jesus did not want his disciples to be caught up in the seemingly permanent nature of the buildings
  - Instead, everything one day will be very different.

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<sup>1</sup> New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Mark 13:1-8, CDROM

- Change seems to be built right into the nature of creation
- This week in particular I am reminded of this truth, as I have been planning two funerals
- Nothing reminds us of our limited time here more than the loss of someone we love
- Like the great buildings and monuments, our time here too is limited
- But there is one key difference: we are not only defined by our time here- we go on
- We are the permanent amidst the impermanent
  - I say it at almost every funeral, every All Souls' service, and I'll say it many more times to come, I imagine
  - Our hope is that even though the things around us eventually fade away
  - And the sense of security they provide is not a true one
  - And even though the life as we know it also ends
  - We do not.
  - Now I will be the first to line up and tell you that I have no idea how that happens, or what that will be like
  - But I know that as creation around us continues to change, and things come and go
  - Buildings and monuments are erected and fall
  - People are born and die
  - God holds us in steadfast love through life, through change, and through our death
  - Jesus challenges us to keep long term perspective: the things we build, the money we make, even our earthly lives are only here for a short time
  - They offer only a fake sense of stability and longevity
  - The pieces that are permanent are having to do with God
  - The rest passes away.
- So the disciples ask Jesus the most obvious and common question: When, Lord?
  - They want to know the signs so they can predict it
  - They want some of their security back since Jesus just told them it would all disappear
  - And Jesus offers the most vague list of signs possible: wars and rumors of wars, famine, false Messiahs, earthquakes

- I am certain he has just described almost every period of human history
- The truth is, we do not know when it will be finished
- I once saw a bumper sticker on a car
  - It read: “Jesus is coming soon. Are you ready?”
  - It then cited one of the Corinthians as its source- I don’t remember which chapter of verse
  - I must admit, I laughed- the irony was too great
  - A sense of urgency about the return of Jesus from a letter written almost 2000 years go!
- And yes, I had a little fun at this unknown person’s expense
- I do not get caught up in worrying too much about the end and Jesus return
- Live your life so that it does not matter when these things pass away and God remakes creation.
- However, I do believe that one day God will, even though I do not worry about it or fear it
- It is our hope too
- Is the same hope that one day, all of creation will be made new
- Gods acts described in the creation story in Genesis are still underway, and creation is still in its birth pains
- It is not yet complete- it has not yet fulfilled its divine potential
- But one day it will.
- For now, we are in the middle phase of not yet
- Somewhere between a lump of clay on the potters wheel, and the finished vase
- Everything is still being molded
- God is working in each moment of each day, working with us to bring about a new creation
- And God dwells among us.
- In the midst of creation changing around us, things passing away, we do have some constants
  - We know God is eternal
  - And a part of us is also eternal, existing with God after we die.
  - And we, like the disciples, sometimes need help remembering what deserves our focus
  - As the day approaches, Hebrews tells us to hold fast to the confession of our hope

- And provoke one another to love and good deeds
- I love that: we are to provoke one another to love and good deeds
- And the reason is simple: the things we do for God and the things we do for other people
- They are the things that will last.
- They are the only things that will make an everlasting mark, even beyond the ancient monuments we see today
- We are the permanent amidst the impermanent
- The world as we know it might end tomorrow, Jesus might come back
- Or it could last another 2000 years
- Regardless, Jesus challenges us to live each day focused on what truly matters, and what will last an eternity.
- This week is Thanksgiving, and it will not be long before Christmas is here...
  - (if you judge by the Christmas decorations already up in the neighborhood, you might think it's here already)
- We will be pulled in many directions, we will be told there is meaning in many places
- Especially during this time of year, we will be told that there is lasting meaning in buying, in material things, and in economic growth
- As Jesus says, there will be wars and rumors of war, and many trying to lead us astray
- Stay in prayer the weeks to come, ask God to move our hearts' focus and desire to the things that will really last.

Amen.