

In the Meantime
Mark 13:1-8
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At about this time last year, I was looking around for a house to buy. Up until then I had only ever lived in rented apartments and houses, so I had never experienced what people refer to as the “joys of home ownership.” You know what I mean by that, right? I’m not talking about the satisfaction of putting money toward a personal investment every month when you make the mortgage payment, or the fun of picking the paint colors that you like and having the freedom to do what you want to do to the house. No, I’m talking about the “joy” of having a clog in the mainline that leads to a flood in the utility room, or the “joy” of hearing water dripping behind the wall because there is a hole in a piece of old plumbing pipe that needs to be replaced, and the biggest “joy” of all which is having to find and pay the plumber because there’s no landlord to call! I’ve learned all about these joys in this last year, and the other thing I’ve learned is that sometimes one “joy” leads to another, doesn’t it? When I had that flood in the utility room, I ended up having to call an electrician to the house a few days later because the flood caused some sort of electrical problem and my dryer stopped working. Despite these things, I am very thankful for my home, and even though it’s an older home it has its good points, too. One of the good things about my house is that it’s a solid block house, and my home inspector said block houses like mine are like tanks. It requires maintenance and upkeep, but it was built to last with those concrete blocks.

In this morning’s Scripture reading from Mark, we hear Jesus and his disciples talking about a block house of a sort. It’s actually the Temple in Jerusalem that we hear them talking about. The Temple that they were looking at and talking about was the second Temple that had been built originally in about 516 BC when the Jews returned from exile, and it had been upgraded and expanded by Herod the Great about 15 years before Jesus was born. Even during Jesus’s life and up through about 64 AD, final touches and enhancements were being made. Here is one description of what Jesus and the disciples would have been looking at as they talked. “Its highest wall was 158 feet from bedrock; its length was roughly equivalent to five football fields end to end and about 1,000 feet wide. The quarried limestones ranged from three to thirty feet long and from three to six feet high. These stones weighed from one to forty tons each. The joints were dry

mortared, joined with paper-thin precision. The engineering necessary to construct the walls surrounding and supporting the Temple complex and the Temple itself was nothing short of genius.”¹ It was an amazing structure and one of the disciples commented on it. Let’s look at Mark 13:1-8 and listen to what they said.

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

³When 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?”⁵ Then 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 rumors 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.

It’s not uncommon for people to comment on and appreciate engineering and architectural marvels. Back in September I was in Charleston, and we visited the Mount Pleasant Memorial Waterfront Park which is at one end of the Ravenel Bridge over the Cooper River. The bridge is the 3rd longest cable stayed bridge in the Western Hemisphere, and from the pier, we had a great view of it and especially the giant pillars under the bridge. I was amazed at how big those pillars are when you see them up close, and as we stood there looking at it, we were saying things like, “I wonder how many feet it is from the top of that pillar down to the water,” and “I wonder what the distance is between the pillars,” and “look how big those things are!” The disciple that commented on the giant stones and the awesome structure of the Temple was doing what people do when we see impressive things. His comment was something to be expected, but Jesus’s comment in response is a little more surprising. The lectionary Scripture readings that take us through the end of the church year emphasize Jesus’s roles as prophet, priest, and king, and here, when the disciple comments on

¹ Milligan, Keith, “The Majesty of Herod’s Temple.” Israel My Glory. June/July 1990.
<https://israelmyglory.org/article/the-majesty-of-herods-temple/>

the magnificence of the Temple, Jesus goes into prophet mode. Instead of saying, "I know! Those stones are really big," he says that a time is coming when this building that looks like it would surely last forever, Herod's great architectural achievement, will be reduced to rubble. It probably seemed hard to imagine something like that happening, and the disciples wanted to know when it would.

Jesus's response to the disciples' question begins in verse 5 and it stretches on past verse 9 where we stopped reading this morning all the way to the end of chapter 13. He doesn't give them a date for when his prophecy about the Temple would be fulfilled, but he does tell them that there would be difficult days and events coming. What we know now, that they didn't know, is that some of the events that Jesus foretold here took place less than 40 years later in AD 70 when the Romans destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the Temple. The Temple which had just been completed in 64, stood for only 6 years in its completed form before it was destroyed.

When I think about that grand building and the huge limestone blocks getting destroyed almost as soon as it was finished, it makes me think about building projects and which building projects would be the best to invest in. I have a couple of ideas for my house, but that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the other kinds of things we all build as we go through life-families, friendships, careers, reputations, bank accounts. We're all builders in that sense, and it's good to build things, but our Scripture reminds me that there are pitfalls to beware of when we build. One is that it is possible for people to build things that we would be better off not building - things that end up causing harm. Wealth built through dishonest and unjust means, for example, is not a good thing to build. Hatred toward a person or group of people because we don't like the color of their skin is not a good thing to build. We would be better off if people didn't build those kinds of things.

A second pitfall is that our buildings can become distractions or even idols. Building a career is a good and important thing to do - especially if you like to eat - but some have spent so much time and energy on building their careers that they have lost their families in the process because they devoted all their time and all of themselves to the singular building of the career. Similarly, a bank account, while a good thing to build, can become an idol. Some have sacrificed practically everything - their relationships, their integrity, their health - just to keep building that bank account.

In Jesus's day, as great as the Temple building was, some of the things that were happening in the Temple were not great. Some of the priests and religious officials had given themselves over to these building pitfalls that I've just mentioned. They had built reputations, and wealth and they had done it

dishonestly and at the expense of others. Jesus accused them of turning what should have been a house of prayer into a den of robbers. They were so religious and so caught up in their rules and regulations that they were blinded to the truth that Jesus proclaimed, and they looked for ways to kill him. On the outside the building looked strong, and beautiful, and impressive, but what was happening on the inside was at odds with God, and for that reason it couldn't and wouldn't last.

There are so many opportunities and temptations that come to us to build things that may look great on the outside and impressive to some people, but if we want to build something that will last, the question we have to ask ourselves is are we building *with* God or are we building without, or even against, God? And even more specifically we may ask ourselves, whose kingdom am I building? Am I chasing after my own plans and purposes, and my own glory and power, building a little kingdom where I get to sit on the throne and be ruler and everything revolves around me? We can ask this about how we are building our families, or our incomes, or our relationships with each other, or our ministry together in this church. We can ask about anything we are building, and if we measure our actions and our motives against the teachings of Jesus, and if we look and listen for guidance from the Holy Spirit, we should be able to get an idea of whether we are working with or against God. God has given us the Word to help us, and Jesus has given us his Spirit who he promised in John 14 "will teach you everything and remind you of all I said to you." Of course, we don't have to do this. We can build things without and against God, and we can build our own little kingdoms, but we should know that those building projects will ultimately go the same way of the impressive Temple.

Jesus's prophetic words in Mark 13 describe great difficulties that his followers would experience – false teachers who would try to lead them astray, beatings, trials, and terrible persecution. They were going to live through a clash of kingdoms – the kingdom of this world and its powers resisting the rule of Jesus and his kingdom, and that clash of kingdoms is still going on and will go on, but it *won't* go on forever. The day is coming, and Jesus pointed to this day in Mark 13, when Jesus's kingdom will be the only kingdom and every enemy and opposing force will be placed under his feet. There will be no more clashing when that day comes, and only God's buildings will stand and go on standing forever when that day comes. When it comes to making decisions then, and commitments about what we want to build in our lives, a promise like this becomes a great incentive to spend ourselves working on the things that will last forever rather than those that will eventually pass away.

Jesus wanted his disciples to keep that day in view as they endured pain and persecution and challenges to give them hope and to keep them motivated to keep building God's things, and he wants us to keep that day in view, too, as we live our lives. God's things – love, justice, peace - God's things are the most important and most lasting things that we can invest in building. God's kingdom is the greatest building project that we can join in on, and we do that by living in obedience to Jesus and inviting others to obey and follow Jesus, too.

One of the greatest gifts that is ours as people of faith is that we do get to know where things in this world are going. That doesn't mean that we get spared from living through hard times, and we won't and we don't always understand all of the craziness we see around us it. We may find ourselves asking God again and again, "How long?" and though we don't get the answer, Jesus has promised that God wins in the end. This means that we aren't running in circles like a hamster on a wheel, but God is actually moving things forward day by day toward a day when the troubles and sorrows that we know now will be no more. Like the picture on the bulletin, there is a light at the end of the tunnel, and the words that go with the picture on the front of the bulletin invite us to think about what we do and how we live in the meantime. God's word to us today is a warning to avoid building things that aren't going to last and instead to use the time and the resources that we have been given well. In the meantime as we wait for Jesus, commit and stay committed to Jesus and his kingdom. Persevere in submitting to his rule and his way and share that way with others. Even when we come up against the obstacles and setbacks that inevitably come when you're working on building something, stick with it knowing that the day of completion is coming. Amen.