

**SERMON**  
**Church of the Holy Communion, Memphis, Tennessee**  
**The Reverend Alexander H. Webb II (“Sandy”)**  
**November 15, 2015**

**The Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Revised Common Lectionary ~ Proper 28B**  
**Mark 13:1-8**

**“Falling Pillars”**

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The disciples say, “Look, Teacher, what...large buildings!”

Jesus says, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

Fr. Sandy says, “If you’re going to be tearing down buildings, please start with our gymnasium.”<sup>1</sup>

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The buildings to which Jesus’ disciples refer are not ancillary. The disciples are not talking about programming spaces, welcome centers, or gymnasiums. The disciples are looking at the second great temple in Jerusalem, which had stood for more than five hundred years.

The temple was at the center of Jewish religious life. Scripture prescribed the temple’s dimensions and ancient doctrine governed its use. The temple was the only place that a Jewish person could go for religious instruction, for the absolution of sins, or for an opportunity to encounter the divine. In every way, the temple was the very dwelling place of God.

The ancient temple has no modern analogue. We have no single place where every aspect of life can be ordered, where God is said to dwell. The destruction of the temple would have been more significant than seeing our columbarium ploughed over with our loved ones still in it. The destruction of the temple would have been more significant than seeing our iconic dorsal curtain torn from top to bottom. The destruction of the temple would have been more significant than seeing a wrecking ball fly through this beautiful sanctuary.

The temple was everything to the ancient Jews. When Jesus’ prophecy was fulfilled in the year 70 A.D., the greatest pillar of Jewish life disappeared forever. Nothing made sense anymore; nothing could be trusted. God’s people had no framework for making sense of the world, and they were terribly afraid.

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<sup>1</sup> This opening quip is courtesy of Dr. David Perry Ouzts, an accomplished humorist and musician.

Jesus terrifies his disciples for a reason. Up to that point, their faith had been anchored in a building, but Jesus needed their faith to be anchored in the heart. Isaiah made the same point centuries before: “The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.”<sup>2</sup>

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On October 22, 2010, I was visiting a good friend of mine in the small Eastern Virginia town of Kilmarnock. As I stood in my friend’s kitchen, my telephone began to light up with text messages and missed calls. Colleagues and friends from my Virginia Seminary days were calling to tell me that our beloved Immanuel Chapel was engulfed in flame.

For 129 years, Immanuel Chapel was the spiritual home for thousands of aspiring priests. The chapel cradled our pain when the hard work of spiritual formation became unbearable. The chapel held our confusion when our studies undermined our preconceptions. Our prayers had seeped into the chapel’s walls, and they were now rising like smoke before God.<sup>3</sup> Despite the best efforts of many, Immanuel Chapel was gone by sundown. A building that took a year to build and a century to hallow was lost in an afternoon.

Scholars refer to this morning’s reading from St. Mark’s Gospel as the “little apocalypse” – the world did not end on that day, but it seemed to, and for the Jews it might as well have. For me, the significance of the “little apocalypse” is best illustrated by the fire at Immanuel Chapel, but I wonder how it might be best illustrated for you?

As you think about events in your own life, remember that Jesus is speaking about life’s pillars, not just its buildings. A little apocalypse engenders not only the grief that comes from loss, but the fear that comes from disorder and absence. It could be the death of a loved one, the destruction of a building, or the collapsing of a career. But, a little apocalypse could also be more abstract.

So many of you have told me that the South is not what it once was: Agriculture is being industrialized, guns are being debated, the role of women is changing, life is moving faster, soybeans are replacing cotton, families do not look like they once did, Confederate history is being reexamined, churches are on the decline, people are not sitting on their porches, and even the handwritten thank you note – the last bastion of civilization! – seems like the relic of a bygone era. Whether you agree or disagree with any of these evolutions, the fact remains that our way of life in this region is changing, and for some people it might as well be ending.

A little apocalypse, whatever it may be for you or for me, reminds us that everything in this life is transient. Everything on this earth will one day pass away, even the tall oaks that we think can never fall. But the word of God is different in kind: “The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.”

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 40:8 (NRSV)

<sup>3</sup> Cf., Revelation 8:4

The disciples' ancestors did not need to imagine what life would be like without the temple. The first great temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar in the year 586 B.C., inaugurating the Israelites' season of captivity in Babylon.

During their exile, the Israelites thought that they had lost everything – the temple, the Promised Land, the very presence of God. The Psalmist describes the exile in this way: “By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept...”<sup>4</sup> Despite their pain, the Israelites learned an important lesson in Babylon. It was the same lesson that God taught their ancestors in the wilderness, the same lesson that Jesus taught his disciples in Jerusalem, and the same lesson that Holy Scripture speaks to us this morning: God will never, ever leave us alone.

In the dark days immediately following the little apocalypse at Immanuel Chapel, the Reverend Dr. Robert Prichard, professor of church history, reminded us of this fundamental truth. He wrote: “I will miss the chapel building I have known, but with God’s grace we will find a place for the men and women of this community to gather together, to hear the Word of God read and proclaimed, and to raise their voices in common prayer and song. And we can be assured that the Lord is with us, wherever it is that we gather.”<sup>5</sup>

Little apocalypses are never easy. In fact, we can only ever identify them by the depths of their pain. But, Jesus reminds us this morning that our faith does not depend on buildings, or on cultures, or even on people. Our faith finds its foundation in the indomitable word of God, which can and will endure all things.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 137:1a (*The Book of Common Prayer*, 792).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Prichard. “The Lord is With Us.” *From Ashes to Action: A Chapel Burns and a Seminary Rebuilds*. Alexandria, Virginia: Virginia Theological Seminary, 2014. 35. [Punctuation added for ease of oral delivery.]