

An Invitation to Watch

For the children:

Do you know what this is? (*I have small potted shamrocks.*) These are shamrocks. Look. Each one of them has three leaves.

Do you know why I have shamrocks in church today?

Because it's Saint Patrick's Day! Saint Patrick lived a long, long, long time ago. He was born in England but was captured and taken to Ireland as a slave. He escaped and returned to his home. But God told him to go back to Ireland and tell people about God's love.

So he went to Ireland where shamrocks grow wild. He used the shamrock to teach people about God. He said, "Look at these leaves. They come in groups of three. None of them is a shamrock without the other two; and a shamrock wouldn't be a shamrock without all three. That's how it is with God. God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. None happens without the other two."

Well, he may not have said it quite that way, but it was pretty close to that.

When he died, people began to celebrate his life, remembering him on this day ever since. And so, we have shamrocks to remember Saint Patrick and to remember the lessons he taught people. And some people wear green on this day in his honor – especially people whose family came from Ireland – people like me!

Let's pray:

Dear God, thank you for teachers like Saint Patrick. Thank you for people who teach us about your love. Help us share your love with each other. Amen.

As Jesus left the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Teacher, look! What awesome stones and buildings!" Jesus responded, "Do you see these enormous buildings? Not even one stone will be left upon another. All will be demolished." Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives across from the temple. Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will these things happen? What sign will show that all these things are about to come to an end?" Jesus said, "Watch out that no one deceives you. Many people will come in my name, saying, 'I'm the one!' They will deceive many people. When you hear of wars and reports of wars, don't be alarmed. These things must happen, but this isn't the end yet. Nations and kingdoms will fight against each other, and there will be earthquakes and famines in all sorts of places. These things are just the beginning of the sufferings associated with the end.

"In those days, after the suffering of that time, the sun will become dark, and the moon won't give its light. The stars will fall from the sky, and the planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken. Then they will see the Human One coming in the clouds with great power and splendor. Then he will send the angels and gather together his chosen people from the four corners of the earth, from the end of the earth to the end of heaven. "Learn this parable from the fig tree. After its branch becomes tender and it sprouts new leaves, you know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see these things happening, you know that he's near, at the door. I assure you that this generation won't pass away until all these things happen. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will certainly not pass away. "But nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the angels in heaven and not the Son. Only the Father knows. Watch out! Stay alert! You don't know when the time is coming. It is as if someone took a trip, left the household behind, and put the servants in charge, giving each one a job to do, and told the doorkeeper to stay alert. Therefore, stay alert! You don't

know when the head of the household will come, whether in the evening or at midnight, or when the rooster crows in the early morning or at daybreak. Don't let him show up when you weren't expecting and find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to all: Stay alert!"

Mk. 13:1-8, 24-37 (C.E.B.)

For the adults:

In case you've forgotten, our scripture texts in worship have been taken from the Narrative Lectionary. Because of that, we've been working our way through the Gospel of Mark since the beginning of the year. As Lent began, we heard Jesus telling his disciples he was going to Jerusalem to face his own death (Mk. 9:31). He invited them to follow him.¹ Then we talked about opening our eyes to see what God is doing. He invited us to see.¹

Then we skipped a chapter, the chapter we will hear next week. In that chapter, Jesus makes his entry into Jerusalem. In that story the temple is mentioned for the first time in Mark's gospel, but it is featured prominently in the foreground of the rest of the story, including our text for today (Mk. 11:11, 12, 15, 16, 27; 12:35, 41; 13:1, 3; 14:49, 58; 15:29). In fact, in each of the last two weeks we heard Jesus teaching and preaching in and around the temple (Mk. 12:1-12, 28-44). He invited us to confess our sins and to find ways to love.¹

If we take careful note, we see that on each day after his arrival in Jerusalem, Jesus and his disciples retreat outside the city before returning again. And each day they walk in the shadows of the temple.

Known as Herod's Temple, it was renowned for its architectural beauty. Josephus, a Jewish historian who was a near contemporary of Jesus, describes the temple in great detail. He says that some of the stones were enormous – measuring forty feet long and twelve feet high and eighteen feet thick! The outside was covered with gold that glimmered in the sunlight so that from a distance it looked like the place where the sun rested.

The truth is Herod had this temple built to leave a lasting legacy of his own greatness more than his devotion to God. And there was no doubt it was impressive. It had become a significant source of pride for the Jewish people.

As our text today begins, we find Jesus sitting opposite the temple on the Mount of Olives (Mk. 13:3). He and his disciples are looking at the temple. But what Jesus sees and what his disciples see are two different things.

The disciples look around and see a magnificent structure.
Jesus sees the glory of God.

It's easy to see why the disciples might "gaze with admiration at the huge stones and impressive decorations."² They are simply in awe of it. Jesus, on the other hand, sees a building that is temporary at its best. He sees it as a distraction. "This is nothing," he says. "It is not the building that is important. Like all buildings before and since, it will someday be nothing more than a pile of rubbish" (Mk. 13:2).

¹ Alluding to the titles of my Lenten sermons so far: An Invitation to Follow; An Invitation to See; An Invitation to Confess; An Invitation to Love.

² Geddert, p. 304

The disciples marvel at the massive building and wonder how? And when will it be destroyed (Mk. 13:1, 4)?

Rather than providing a direct answer, Jesus points to God. He says to look beyond the daily news and see the truth that God is present, in the midst of turbulent times as well as the peaceful.

It's a matter of having eyes to see and ears to hear (Mk 4:9).

What follows this scene is what is commonly referred to as the "little apocalypse," a portion of which we also heard.

The word "apocalypse" is a Greek word meaning "to uncover" or "reveal." It's the root of the word used for the title of one of the better-known biblical apocalypses, "Revelation." And when most people read these apocalypses, they think the biblical narratives are "revealing" or "uncovering" the future.

They try to read it as if they were reading fortune cookies, or tea leaves, trying to interpret the riddle of some future event.

And all kinds of lore have developed around these "revelations" of God, including science fiction novels and movies. I also know that Pastor Dave did a sermon series on Revelation four years ago. In fact, the artwork that complemented that series still hangs in the Fellowship Hall. And while some might argue we should spend more time with this genre of scripture, I think it needs to be kept in balance with and interpreted by other scriptural texts.

You see, many Christians mistakenly think the purpose of apocalyptic literature is to frighten the readers into believing, when in fact, the opposite is actually the case. They are intended to give those who already believe the confidence to endure until the end of the age.³

Of course, I tend to read apocalyptic literature through the eyes of someone who made a realization while I was in high school. When I was twelve years old, I spent the summer with my grandmother. Among the things I remember about that summer was my encounter with this book, *Bible Readings for the Home Circle*. Not your typical middle school selection, to be sure.

But I was fascinated by a series of charts that present the various scenes from the book of Revelation, each described as a timeline for the imminent return of Christ. For example, the seven churches mentioned early in Revelation are presented as eras in time, complete with historical evidence, leaving no doubt that we are living in the last era.⁴

A few years later, I found myself reading Hal Lindsay's *The Late Great Planet Earth* and concluded that he was saying the same thing. Only this was written 100 years earlier. My new theory – one I mostly cling to still today – is that we have been looking at the wrong aspects of apocalyptic literature. Rather than pointing to some date in the future, they are always reminding us of our mortality. They are meant to give us hope as we live out our days, knowing our days are limited.

In other words, I believe Jesus is not trying to "reveal" things about the future but is instead trying to help us "uncover" the mysteries of God in the present. He is inviting us to discern what is taking place in our lives, to be alert for signs of God's presence and to find ways to align our lives with God's purposes.

³ Ronald Allen, WorkingPreacher

⁴ *Bible Readings*, p. 281,

Jesus goes on to speak about wars and rumors of wars, of falling stars and the coming darkness (Mk. 13:7, 24). He also says this is just “the beginning of the sufferings” to come (Mk. 13:8). He says the things we see and hear are like birth pangs (Mk. 13:8).⁵

Now, I confess to you that I have never had birth pangs. Despite what it may look like, I’ve never been pregnant. And not only that, but Ronda was also never pregnant during our marriage. Our older children were born long before Ronda and I met, and our others were adopted.

Whenever I’ve asked mothers, though, I hear stories about the pain of giving birth, but they all assure me the pain is soon forgotten. The joy of the child supersedes the pain of childbirth. In a similar vein, I believe Jesus is reminding us that faithfulness is the key to surviving the pain, pain created by the upheavals described in the apocalypse, because there is joy to be found on the other side.

But the question is: what is being born?
What is being revealed or uncovered?

I am convinced it is the Kingdom of God that is being born. I mean, Jesus has been preaching about the coming Kingdom from the very beginning of his ministry (Mk. 1:15 is the first of 14 times he mentions it in Mark’s Gospel).

Depending upon which translation you use, Jesus says to “watch out” or “be alert” or even “beware” (Mk. 13:5 – CEB, NIV, NRSV). Jesus is calling us to be aware of the world around us, to discern what is happening by paying attention, to notice when and where the Kingdom of God is being revealed. He tells us to pay attention several times in this chapter (Mk 13:5, 9, 23, 33, 34, 35, 37).

When I was teaching our children how to drive a car, I tried to teach them to be prepared. I tried to help them envision what they would do in emergency situations – whether it meant pulling to the side of the road when they saw flashing lights or thinking about which way they would turn if a car came across the center line. I taught them how to change a tire and how to use jumper cables, too. And I made sure there were jumper cables in their cars, so they were prepared. And to a certain extent, I think I was successful in teaching them to be prepared.

It was harder to teach them to be alert. It was hard to make them pay attention to the normal background noises and smells so they would recognize a strange sound or odor that might indicate a problem with the car. I tried to help them notice normal traffic patterns so they might recognize danger when things weren’t normal.

Alertness has to do with being aware of your surroundings, and my experience is that it’s hard to teach that to people until they have some experience on which to base their awareness.

Ronda can ask me to check the oven, for example – but if I don’t know what a normal temperature or smell is, I might not have any idea that something is drastically wrong.

“Stay alert!” Jesus says (Mk. 13:33). He also says, “Watch out that no one deceives you” (Mk. 13:5).

The disciples are deceived into believing the temple is permanent. They see it as a promise of God’s presence in their midst. But Jesus invites them to discern how God is at work, how to notice where the spirit is moving.

⁵ Most translations refer to birth pangs; CEB does not.

The disciples seem to want to know when the end of this world will take place (Mk. 13:4). Jesus says they are asking the wrong question. He invites them to ask: “Where have you seen the Kingdom of God?” “When have you witnessed God’s Kingdom breaking forth?”

He says to look for signs of the Kingdom of God – outside the walls of the temple.

When I look for signs of the Kingdom, I can see it everywhere. From the coalition of faith groups involved with Justice Together to the way we welcome little ones in our worship service, from the growing awareness of the inhumane treatment of victims in Gaza to lives being transformed by Family Promise; from the simple pleasures of blooming tulips to the amazing hospitality that invites more people to the table; from the birth of a child to the reconciliation of parent and child – all of which I have witnessed in recent weeks.

If we are watching, if we are alert, we will see the Kingdom. But it’s not to be found in the temple. You see, the Kingdom of God continues to be born in our midst (Mk. 4:11).

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Lenten Communion:

The Worship Commission has invited us to celebrate communion each week during Lent as a community discipline. Each week we will offer a variation in how it is served as a means of exploring different facets of our celebration.

Today, we will be using sourdough bread. We do so as a reminder of the bitterness and the pain Jesus endured on the cross. We remember this meal as his last supper and realize he gave everything for us.

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