

# North Kildonan United Church

14<sup>th</sup> November 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

Mark 13: 1-8

*Gracious God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.*

When it began back in 1914, hopeful people didn't think it would last. As the nations of Europe began mobilizing their armies, as those same nations called upon the dominions of their empires to put their young men into uniform and slap guns into their hands, as the passion for war increased, hopeful people were sure it would all be over by Christmas.

But Christmas 1914 came and went, and the fighting continued. Christmas 1915, Christmas 1916, Christmas 1917, and still the war was not over, and the death toll on all sides mounted, and the shells and bombs devastated the fields, churning and re-churning land meant for wheat and vineyards, for sheep and cattle to peacefully graze. Towns too, towns and cities, many full of architectural wonders, blasted apart, never to be reconstructed.

During those four years of the war to end all wars, which finally stopped with the armistice, which was marked last Thursday, the silence at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month, how many hopeful people exchanged the promise of the boys being home for Christmas, for this war being the sign, THE sign of the return of Christ and the dawning of a new age.

It was such a horrendous four years, such devastation and loss, such cruelty and violence, this must be the beginning of the promised end of the world as we know it, at least so it seemed.

Some religious people thought so. A particular group of them, who to this day are known to knock at a person's door, usually at the most inopportune time, offering their own perspective on the Bible, were quite convinced that 1914 was the dawn of the new kingdom. Though they themselves refused to take up arms, they were sure the return of Christ was just about anytime soon. They later had to revise that date, and revise that date, and yet again revise that date, and I'm not sure what their latest return of Christ date is.

I don't say this to mock them. History is full of people reading the signs of the times and yet not quite reading them. In the 1800s, especially in the United States, there were groups who, through their reading of the Bible and their understanding of the times in which they lived, were convinced that they were destined to be taken up to meet Jesus in the Rapture.

With one particular group of followers, by reading prophecies of ancient days, combined with disillusionment of their current days, a date was determined. These

followers gave away all their earthly possessions, and dressed in white garments, they sat on the top of their barns, waiting all night for the promised coming of Christ. By the morning they realized they were mistaken, and they would need to rebuild their lives.

Perhaps some returned to their Bibles and read Mark 13: 5-8.

*'Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For 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.'*

There are those times, those events which are so massive, so frightening, so spectacular, so unbelievably shocking that we are tempted to see more in them than what is actually there.

Take for example Jesus saying that the Temple will be destroyed. In today's gospel, Peter, James, John, and Andrew are with Jesus at the Temple. They are totally amazed by the size and the beauty of this structure, this holy place, this centre of Jewish faith and worship. And understandably so. The great Roman historian Josephus, who was born not that long after Christ's death and resurrection, described the Temple as "covered all over with plates of gold of great weight, and, at the first rising of the sun, reflected back a very fiery splendour, and made those who forced themselves to look upon it to turn their eyes away."

The Temple was the centre of Jewish worship. Three times over the centuries the Jewish people would build a temple on this site, and during the time of Jesus work was continuing on this magnificent structure, work begun in 19 B.C. and finally completed in A.D. 63. During the Jewish war with the Roman occupiers, in A.D. 70 the Temple was destroyed by the Romans, leaving only the Western Wall, or also known as the Wailing Wall, standing.

As the centre of worship, the Temple, this Jerusalem Temple, was the place of animal and vegetable sacrifice, the only place to make such sacrifices. It was also believed to be the unique dwelling place of God with humanity, a place where heaven and earth met. As such it should be the most beautiful, most magnificent structure humans could create, and it was. And as so often happens with such creations made by human hands, pride and arrogance combine with a confidence in the rightness of their work to corrupt the best intentions of the original planners. Even today, how tempting it is to believe that large numbers mean faithfulness and right practices. It isn't necessarily so. We have seen in our own province how some religious groups present themselves as above the law, especially those congregations with many members and full bank accounts. History tells us that might does not mean right, especially so when that might is exercised in the name of religion.

So, one of the disciples declares how impressed he is with this structure, but Jesus cools their enthusiasm by saying: *"Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."*

Was Mark aware of the literal destruction of the Temple and thus put this fact into the form of a prophecy by Jesus? Some say yes, others suggest that Mark was not aware of the destruction. Sometimes, in a bid for total accuracy, we can take too much of scripture apart and miss the message.

The destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 was a fact, with massive implications for Jewish worship and practice. The end of the Temple meant the end of the practice of sacrificing animals. Such sacrifice was replaced with prayer, fasting and almsgiving as alternative forms of sacrifice. The early Christians used the language of sacrifice in connection with such things as holiness, evangelism, and Holy Communion. Think for instance of the Body and Blood language of the Communion prayer, containing lines such as: "the Body of Christ which was given for you and the Blood of Christ which was shed for you" or "this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving".

So, Jesus begins by foretelling the destruction of the Temple, then warns about being led by leaders who make unwarranted claims that they are the ones to follow. Jesus then describes all kinds of strife and violence and mishap that will happen, summing it all up with: "This is but the beginning of the birth pangs."

Of course, much of what Jesus talked about at that point later came true for his disciples. Following Jesus in those early days was not always easy and certainly not safe, nor actually is it today, in many parts of the world. In time the implications of his revolutionary message, combined with the transformation that happened so often in the lives of his followers, unnerved the political and religious leaders. Those leaders tried so many times to stifle this Jesus movement, using threats and violence, imprisonment and often execution, yet the good news of the gospel spread far and wide. Persecution by the authorities often made those early Christians more determined, more faithful to the One who was their Way, their Truth, and their Life.

A bit later in the chapter Jesus counsels his disciples to endure with patience all the troubles that may befall them. To endure and remain faithful because although it may seem that the world is on fire, that disaster is just around every corner, all this will in time pass, for they are all symptoms of the birth pangs of God's new creation. Trust, be patient and faithful and look for the new day which is just dawning. Think of the words we soon sing:

"The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose  
I will not-I will not desert to his foes;  
that soul, though all hell should endeavour to shake,  
I'll never-no, never-no, never forsake!"

So, we carry on, perhaps calm at times, perhaps not, but we stay the course, and we keep hopeful. We don't waste our time looking for signs of the end, reading into each disaster more than what is actually there. Instead, we trust in God, who is always at work in our world, creating and making new, and in a slight paraphrase of *A New Creed*, working in us and others by the Spirit. So, with the encouragement of *A New Creed*, we celebrate, we live, we love, we serve others, we seek justice, we proclaim Jesus, our judge, and our hope. And through it all we know God is with us, that we are not alone, for which we say a heartfelt *Thanks be to God*.

Let's end with a brief story by Kathleen Norris, from her book *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*.

"What I mean is this: an acquaintance of mine, a brilliant young scholar, was stricken with cancer, and over the course of several years came close to dying three times. But after extensive treatment, both radiation and chemotherapy, came a welcome remission. Her prognosis was uncertain at best, but she was again able to teach, and to write. "I'd never want to go back," she told her department head, an older woman, "because now I know what each morning means, and I am so grateful just to be alive." When the older woman said to her, "We've been through so much together in the last few years," the younger woman nodded, and smiled. "Yes", she said emphatically. "Yes! And hasn't it been a blessing!"

Let us pray:

*The Lord bless you and keep you;*

*the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;*

*the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. Amen.*