

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 28) – Year B – November 18, 2009 Homily
1 Samuel 1:4-20; 1 Samuel 2:1-10; Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13:1-8
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Sometimes you see it coming, and sometimes you just hear the words, “Watch out!” as the moment proceeds in slow motion and stunning Technicolor. Since I was alone in the car with Abby in the back, I didn’t have any alert passenger to signal a warning and I nearly drove into the back of a small SUV. Admittedly, I was a bit distracted by the man standing outside Jiffy Lube waving a sign around, and I simply didn’t realize the driver in front had slowed quickly, clearly with the intent of making a sharp right turn. To make matters worse either his brake lights were not working, or the sun was just at the wrong angle. Either way I wasn’t expecting the sudden stop, at least not until we had reached the traffic light. Fortunately, we didn’t collide, but I heard poor Abby bumping hard into back seats as I stomped on the brake. Accidents happen all the time, especially out on the roads.

In tonight’s Gospel lesson, we have Jesus’ prediction of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, which was most definitely not an accident. Then Jesus goes on to talk about the end times, leaving us with the message that we all need to “Watch out!” for a number of reasons. The general language of this passage is apocalyptic, a type of literature that we find in other parts of the Hebrew and New Testament Scriptures, specifically in the Book of Daniel and the Revelation to John, which are both part of this literary genre. Behind the writing, of course, are both Jewish and Christian movements that embrace this type of teaching. In much more recent times, you might say that groups of Christians like the 19th century Millerites and the associated Seventh Day Adventists also adhere to apocalypticism. They hold to the belief in the imminent second coming of Jesus Christ. In popular culture, there are numerous movies and debates concerning the end of the world. The most current is the so-called 2012 phenomenon, which predicts all kinds of cataclysmic events around the end of the Mayan Long Count Calendar. Just like when we’re driving our cars, it pays not to get too distracted from the present. Let’s dig into a few of the details of this passage, which is Jesus’ longest discourse in the Gospel of Mark.

To place this portion of Mark into context, it is useful to remember that this prediction of the Temple’s destruction has other connecting factors associated with it. In the broadest sense Jesus’ very presence on earth, as the Word made flesh, means that everyone should have been expecting some radical change in the way of the world. Jesus has hinted at the central role He will play in the future worship of God, and the establishment of the kingdom of God through His death and resurrection for the life of the world. As for the Temple itself, in chapter 11 of Mark’s Gospel Jesus comes to Jerusalem and acts out the strange story of the cursing of the fig tree. Even though it is not the season for figs, Jesus looks for the fruit on the tree, and finding none curses it. The next day, the disciples notice that the tree has withered and died. The fig tree is, of course, symbolic of the barrenness of the Jerusalem Temple maimed and damaged by the sordid corruption of her leaders. That story is the prelude to this one, which is the final disqualification of the Temple at Jerusalem as the touch point of divine-human interaction, the focus of worship, and the center of the kingdom of God.

The story of the widow’s mite that we recently heard is essentially a condemnation of Temple institutionalism and paper-thin religiosity. Notice that Jesus and the disciples have now decisively walked away and left the Temple to its fate. They go to the Mount of Olives,

where Jesus and four of His first disciples gather to discuss the Temple's destruction. The words Mark uses are telling, "When [Jesus] was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple..." Biblical references to mountains are usually significant, because the mountains are sites of divine appearances and teachings. Then there is the word "opposite". Indeed Jesus is opposed to the Temple in more ways than mere geography. Jesus will give His life as a result of His challenge to the institutionalized corruption amongst the Judean spiritual leaders. In Jesus' very person and all who believe in Him, we have a new temple of the Holy Spirit – the Body of Christ – with Jesus at its head. Jesus' salvific act, and His victory over sin and death, institutes the kingdom of God throughout the world, and not just with a locus in the Temple at Jerusalem. In Christ, the dividing wall between divine-human interactions has truly been crushed into rubble.

The next part of Jesus' speech does not directly answer the disciples' question of "when will this be, and what will be the sign..." Instead, Jesus offers a remarkable insight into living in the gap between His life, death and resurrection, and his coming again in great glory, knowing that even He does not know the day or hour of that final consummation. The command to "beware" tells us that we should not dwell on living in the future, but look beyond deceptive appearances, and trust God. Looking out for signs is not the kind of watching Jesus desires for our lives. There is, in fact, the much more pressing issue of following Jesus' commands in the present, including the command to play our own parts in fulfilling Jesus' mission to draw all people and nations to God in Christ.

Similarly, when we let God worry about the second coming, we are free to be present to God's grace in daily events and challenges. We are not without our own little apocalypses that we must face. Everything from serious health issues to car accidents, marriage or divorce, the birth of a child or grandchild. These can all be times of stress as much as times of great promise. We are children of hope through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus. Life is ultimately an ongoing cycle of sin and death, repentance and forgiveness, God's grace and redemption, as well as resurrection, new life and hope. Our knowledge of God in Christ is a constant comfort in a very unstable world. Like nations, institutions also rise and fall. Yet through all, in all, and above all, God is in control, and God is constantly working out the divine plan of salvation. When you and I are intentional in *watching out*, we stay focused on the work that God has given us to do in our own lives, even as we share the hope we have in Christ. Finally, the gift of clarity that *watching out* affords us, helps us to uncover the deceptive elements of modern day living that Satan uses to lead us away from God and the work of mission. Good reason to *watch out*! Our faith, hope and trust in God are never accidental. Every moment of life is full of encounters with the Living God, and with gifts of God's grace, **if** we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

Amen.