



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE REV. CANON EMILY GRIFFIN, CANON VICAR  
THE TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, NOVEMBER 17, 2024  
DANIEL 12:1-3, 10-15; PSALM 16; HEBREWS 10:11-25; MARK 13:1-8

## THE NEXT RIGHT STEP

**Mark 13:1-8** *[As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” Then Jesus began to say to them, “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 rumors 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 birthpangs.”]*

What do we do when our world makes no sense – when the institutions we’ve relied on to orient us have crumbled and justice feels like a joke? For those of us who reject violence as a response, who agree with poet Audre Lorde that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” it’s hard sometimes to find the next right step. Such were the circumstances faced

by the writers of our Scriptures today. In the case of the writer of Daniel, the Temple had been desecrated by a vicious tyrant. By the time folks were reading Mark’s Gospel two centuries or so later and the letter to the Hebrews shortly after that, the Temple – hailed as God’s home – was gone, and it seemed like those who destroyed it would never be held

accountable. While our sources of conflict and chaos differ from theirs, the question remains the same: What do we hold onto when our center no longer holds?

We're given a few options in today's readings. We were told in our opening prayer that all Holy Scriptures are written for our learning, so let's see what happens when we try to "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them." Option 1 (as seen in our first reading): When justice no longer seems possible in this life, we can extend the timeline. We can hold onto hope for an eternal reckoning when it seems like it will never happen in time. There's something appealing here – just move the goalposts when winning feels impossible. We desperately want to believe that the wise will be vindicated someday, that their light will shine into eternity – and God's character is consistent with that. It's the other side of the coin that can get us into trouble. Because in our righteous anger, we also want to believe that our enemies will get the "shame and everlasting contempt" they so richly deserve. The challenge, of course, is that we don't get to erase anyone

out of God's book, as enticing as that prospect might sound at times. There's also a danger in spending too much time speculating about eternal reward and punishment; it can numb us to the harm that is being done now and distract us from the work of feeding and sheltering, of solidarity and advocacy that lies before us - whether we're ready for it or not.

Option 2 (as given to us in the Gospel): Hold onto the hope that now is not as good as it gets – or as Jesus puts it, "the end is still to come" - but take care to watch yourself in the meantime. Don't let your fears or any false saviors lead you astray. When it feels like nothing we do will make a difference, it's tempting to follow those who tell us exactly who to blame. It can feel better to have an enemy to direct our anger toward, to narrow the scope of the fight to one we think we can win – whether our target is the true source of our problems or not. The other temptation, of course, is to fall into cynicism or despair – to isolate ourselves, or to stop letting the pain and brokenness touch us at all (if we're not the ones being scapegoated, that is. Some of us don't have

that choice). Resist such temptations, Jesus warns. They only increase the damage and compromise our credibility as bearers of God's love.

So then, if we can't step out of time to feel better or simply go numb, what's left? That's where Option 3 and our passage from Hebrews comes in. We've been hearing snippets of this letter for weeks now, with its obsession with priests and sacrifices and what's different now with Jesus. If we remember that the trauma of the destruction of the Temple likely hangs over everything here, it starts to make more sense.

To the disoriented trying to make sense of a senseless world, the writer outlines the following gameplan: One, "let us approach (our God) with a true heart in full assurance of faith." In other words, remember that Jesus gives us all the access to God's presence and God's forgiveness that we will ever need. No one gets to stand in the way of that. There's no hierarchy, no pecking order, no line. So, step up. Two, "let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering." When our center stops

holding, we're invited to consider what we've allowed to become the center of our lives. The love of God made known in Jesus is a center that holds, because it never stops holding onto us. We're called to hold fast, yes, but in the end, it's not about the strength of our grasp. Our hope is in the fact that the One who promised is faithful and will never let go of us.

And finally, "let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds." You can tell that the writer of Hebrews was part of a faith community. The word here for "provoke" in Greek can also be translated as "irritate" or "pester." That's sometimes what it feels like when our fellow followers of Jesus remind us of the work that's still to be done alongside the poor, the immigrant, the stranger, for our planet. When we're scared and would prefer to hide, when we forget that the church is just as human and messy and imperfect as we are – and that that's no excuse for staying away, we have our fellow believers nudging us on. We need each other now more than ever – to help us remember what we know, to bring us back to our true center, and to deepen our

impact. So, let's keep the long view in mind, let's not let our fears lead us astray, and let's hold onto each other even as God

holds onto us. Together we will find the next right step. Amen.



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