

The Crumbled Walls

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, November 15, 2009)

Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25 (NRSV) ¹¹And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. ¹²But when Christ^f had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, “he sat down at the right hand of God,” ¹³and since then has been waiting “until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.” ¹⁴For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.

¹⁹Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. ²⁴And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Mark 13:1-8 (TEV) ¹As Jesus was leaving the Temple, one of his disciples said, “Look, Teacher! What wonderful stones and buildings!”

²Jesus answered, “You see these great buildings? Not a single stone here will be left in its place; every one of them will be thrown down.”

³Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, across from the Temple, when Peter, James, John, and Andrew came to him in private. ⁴“Tell us when this will be,” they said, “and tell us what will happen to show that the time has come for all these things to take place.”

⁵Jesus said to them, “Watch out, and don’t let anyone fool you. ⁶Many men, claiming to speak for me, will come and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will fool many people. ⁷And don’t be troubled when you hear the noise of battles close by and news of battles far away. Such things must happen, but they do not mean that the end has come. ⁸Countries will fight each other; kingdoms will attack one another. There will be earthquakes everywhere, and there will be famines. These things are like the first pains of childbirth.

Did any of you read the book, “Left Behind?” There were actually quite a few books in this series. I just read the first one, well, I almost read it to the end, but I became so disgusted with the whole thing that I just skimmed the last few pages. If you haven’t read this book, which caused quite a stir a couple years ago, I can summarize it by telling you that the writer of this fiction book takes a relatively minor Biblical teaching – something called the rapture, adds some of his own reinterpretations from the apocalyptic writings of the Revelation, and spins this story as a tale of the 21st century. One of the reasons I disliked the book was because the way it ended. It seemed to just plead, “Come and buy the next book, and the next, and the next, so that I become a famous author and have a big income.” (gag!)

But another reason I disliked the book was because the author was doing exactly what Jesus told his disciples not to do. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus told the disciples that the temple, with its huge, impressive stones, would be destroyed, so that not one stone would rest upon another. The disciples wanted to know more. Their reaction was like, “Oh, wow, you can predict the future – tell us when this will happen.” And Jesus very plainly tells the disciples, “**When you hear of wars and rumors of wars** (and all kinds of terrible things are happening), **do not be alarmed.**” There will be all kinds of terrible things happening, all the time – the whole of Mark 13 deals with these terrible things. But Jesus is trying to tell the disciples, don’t try to do your own interpreting about the end times, based on the things going on around you. You just take care of yourself, be sure you are doing what is right, or in other words, be ready to meet the Lord, whenever the time comes.

I think the disciples, and we, miss a very important lesson if we misinterpret what Jesus said in the first 2 verses. They came out of the temple and the disciples were impressed by the big building. That is when Jesus told them that this would all come crumbling down. If you are just looking at the stones, you will miss what I believe is the main message. Don’t we say that the church is not the building, as Rosina was explaining to the children, but the people, the Gospel message, the ministry? Let’s take that same perspective and consider the temple not as the building, but instead, let’s look at what was going on there.

First of all, the temple was the place where people came and brought their sacrifices. They brought doves, or rams, or sometimes even oxen. The writer of Hebrews, in the first part of our lesson, tells us that Jesus has given the one true sacrifice. These temple sacrifices are no longer needed. Just as Jesus drove the money changers out

of the temple, so Jesus has driven out the need for more sacrifices. We don't do it any more, not just because it is messy, but because it is not necessary. Jesus has made the one sacrifice, giving his own life, which was such a great sacrifice that any other sacrifice pales in comparison and is irrelevant and unnecessary.

Aside from the sacrifices, the whole practice and spirit of worship is different now. In the temple, there were four chambers. The outer chamber was for inquirers, seekers, women and children. To get to the next chamber you had to be a Jewish male – no Gentiles, no women and children allowed. The third chamber in was only for priests. That was where they went to offer sacrifices and lead worship. But the fourth chamber, the real inner sanctum, called the Holy of Holies, was where only the high priest could go, only once every year. There was a curtain in the doorway to this inner chamber so that the priest couldn't even see in. In a sense, in their thinking, that was where God was. Nobody could just walk into that room for fear of their very lives – to see God was to die. But do you remember, when Jesus was crucified, that the curtain was torn in two? Do you remember what that meant to the disciples of Jesus? It meant that anyone could go in, could go directly to God, through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. All those walls and divisions of the temple were broken down, so that today, every one of us can come before the throne of God in prayer and praise. In this way, not one stone of the temple has been left on top of another – not the stones and walls of the building, but of the walls that separate us from God. God is with us, wherever we go, not hidden away in the middle of even the most magnificent temple. This is what the writer of Hebrews is telling us in verse 19 to 22. **“We have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus.”** Even the high priest didn't have confidence to enter the holy of holies, except once a year. **“Our hearts are sprinkled clean and our bodies washed with pure water.”** These are rituals the priest had to practice meticulously before entering the temple. To approach God without adequate preparation was certain death. The writer of Hebrews says, **“We have a great priest over the house of God,”** and that priest is Jesus Christ. Through Christ, the walls have been broken, the veil is torn open, and we can approach God.

So, now what are we to do, if all the walls have been torn down and the sacrifice is no longer necessary? Especially in these days of war and earthquake and famine. The writer of Hebrews, in the second part of our lesson, instructs us to do five things, which I will describe using five “A”s:

Approach God, **with a true heart, in full assurance of faith.** Don't ignore God, don't pretend God isn't there, don't try to go it alone --- don't be afraid. The veil in the temple is torn – we can enter into God's presence at any time. We use so many songs and hymns about walking with God – well, do it!

Second, **abide** in God's promise, or as Hebrews says, **“hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.”** This doesn't mean we live without doubts. But it does mean that we come back, again and again, to the words of hope, the promises of God, that God loves us, that God forgives us, that God wants to save us, even from death, and give us life everlasting.

Arouse one another to do good deeds. Our translation uses the word “provoke” one another to love and good deeds. Provoke tends to be a negative word. We can try to redefine “provoke” in positive terms, but maybe it is easier to change words. So I suggest we use the word, “Arouse” one another to do good deeds. This means it is not enough to refrain from sin, but you have to go beyond that, you have to take action, and even encourage others, to do good deeds, to show love.

Assemble is the fourth A-word – our lesson says do not neglect to meet together. Can you imagine Christians in the first century already neglecting to gather together for worship? How quickly some must have slipped away from the faith. How lonely it is, how hard it is, to maintain faith by yourself. Worship is really the heart of the Christian life of faith, the foundation from which all else springs. And when we gather together, that is how we implement the fifth A-word:

Assist one another in the faith. We are in this together. Not one of us is the church by ourselves. Not one of us is the body of Christ. Not one of us is adequate to the task. But together, we are the church, we are the body of Christ. Together, we can approach God, we can abide in God's promises, we can arouse one another to good deeds, we can assist one another in faith, if we assemble and take our command to be the body of Christ, together.

This is the church. Not the bricks, not the stones, not even the new roof. They will all come crumbling down some day – don't worry about when it might happen. Because as long as Christians **assemble** to **approach** God, **abide** in God's promises, assist one another in faith, and **arouse** one another to good deeds, then we are the church, the body of Christ. May God send his Holy Spirit so that today, in this place, we can be found faithful, we can be the church, and we can be God's people. Amen.