

“SOMETHING NEW IS COMING!”

Mark 13:1-8

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When people ask for directions to Church of the Saviour, I say it is on Lee Rd. between Fairmount Blvd. and Cedar Road. Then I usually say something to the effect of “It’s a massive stone building. You can’t miss it!” When I meet people and they ask where I am a pastor, when I say, “Church of the Saviour,” typically, if they are from the Cleveland area, especially from the east side, they will say, “Oh, that’s the big stone church on Lee Rd. I know which one you mean.” Church of the Saviour is a landmark in this community. Its design is patterned after a Gothic cathedral in the south of France. In fact, the building committee in the 1920's sent their architect to Europe to study cathedrals and then come back and build one here in Cleveland Heights. Books have been written about Gothic architecture in general and Gothic cathedrals in particular. The characteristics of size and a sense of grandeur are obvious. The stones are massive. The sanctuary ceiling is four stories high. The front doors are eight inches thick. The Great West Window alone contains fifty thousand pieces of glass, and I could go on and on. At a recent dedication of a building in University Circle, the comment was made concerning that ultra-modern building that it will last forty to fifty years. Forty to fifty years! Cathedrals are designed and built to last hundreds of years. With proper maintenance, our grandchildren and great-grandchildren and the people of this community will continue to enjoy the beauty and the permanence of this structure for generations to come.

Our new addition, with its state-of-the-art safety and educational features also retains a Gothic appearance of majesty and permanence. The reason the building cost so much is partly because of the massive steel beams that lift our eyes heavenward, and the brick and stone construction that will stand the test of time. The shape of the windows, another Gothic influence, reminds us to fold our hands and pray to the God who is the same — yesterday, today and forever.

This church, as all Gothic cathedrals, is patterned after the Temple in Jerusalem, built by Solomon a thousand years before the birth of Christ. It had stood the test of time when Jesus’ disciples admired it one day after worship. One of them commented, “*Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!*” No doubt he expected Jesus to reply by saying, “Yes, those stone masons in Solomon’s day certainly knew how to build a building!” But instead, Jesus replied, “*Do you see these buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.*”

To say that the disciples were alarmed was an understatement. We are spending \$ 165,000 to repair the water damage to the south side of our sanctuary. Next year we will need to do the same work on the north side. What would happen if I told the Trustees that after all

that, this building would be destroyed? After 9/11 our insurance went up dramatically. How do you protect a building like this? How do you rebuild a Gothic cathedral in our day, with its intricate stone work and wood carving and all the rest? This church is valued at \$ 32 million. But could it be replaced for that, or any amount of money?

Well, not only were the disciples upset by what Jesus said. Sadly, Jesus' prediction came true. The great rebellion against the Romans of 66 - 74 A.D. was not successful, and Rome left Israel devastated, Jerusalem destroyed, and the Temple demolished. Now, Jesus' point in telling the disciples that the Temple would be destroyed was not to predict the future. It was to promote repentance and reform. The destruction of Jerusalem came only because Jesus' words of warning went unheeded. Jesus could see that by the way people were living their lives, death and destruction were sure to come. No building lasts forever. But beyond the physical attributes of the Temple, Jesus was concerned about the structures of the hearts and lives of the people. Without reformation, without repentance, without a change of heart, they were doomed to perish.

It must have seemed to the early Christians that their world was coming to an end. They had to watch as their numbers were decimated by persecution, imprisonment and death. Life in Israel's rocky terrain had always been challenging, but it seemed to many that things were going from bad to worse. The Jewish people were used to foreign domination, but Rome was making it increasingly difficult to eke out a living, and with each new administration, the rules seemed to change.

We can relate. Has there been a more challenging time to be alive than these past few weeks? The recession has taken its toll on all of us. The media has scared us to death with its reports of the onslaught of the swine flu. As if the horrific killings in Fort Hood, Texas, are not enough to cause a combination of fear and grief, we learn more every day about our own Cleveland killer, whose pattern it was to invite women to his home, rape them, murder them, and then bury them on his property.

Jesus does not deny that times are bad. He never tells his disciples to ignore the signs of the times or to hum a little tune about looking on the "sunny side of life." Jesus never denies that pain and destruction and sadness and loss are part of life. But he does say that there is more going on in this world than a swine flu epidemic and a 26 year high in unemployment and mentally deranged killers who take the lives of innocent people. According to Jesus, there is a new world about to be born, and these things, horrific though they may be, should remind us that God is at work — even in the pain, even in the destruction, even in the loss, to create a better world.

A fellow pastor related recently how a member of his congregation, a lifetime banker, was unceremoniously fired. A couple members of the bank board simply came into his office one afternoon and told him to clean out his desk and leave. His pastor found him the next day, lying on the sofa in his living room, staring at the ceiling, horribly depressed. "That bank was my life, my whole life," he muttered. "I left home every day at 6:30 in the morning. It was my whole life, so now that it's gone, my life is gone."

A couple months later, when the pastor met with the man, he looked different, very much improved. The pastor asked him how he was getting along. "I didn't have the guts to quit, so the bank did it for me," he said. "I should have done it twenty years ago. I'm better off now. I gave more to that bank than I should have."⁽¹⁾

There is much hope that can be found, even in the midst of great pain, chaos and despair.

I heard a man say, “When I went bankrupt, I discovered that life was about love, not money.” A woman shared, “When I got hit by a truck while riding my bicycle, and ended up in the hospital, as strange as it may sound, in my recovery I learned to savor joy.” “When my son got in trouble with drugs,” one woman told me, “I thought it was the end of the world. But in his recovery process, he discovered God and himself.” There seems to be a pattern here, if we look hard enough, if we look carefully enough. It is the pattern of life from death, liberation from bondage, resurrection after crucifixion. Jesus talks about it as the birth pangs of a new age.

Last week-end my daughter-in-law, Jennie, was in town. Barb had a baby shower for her. We are well aware that a new baby is on the way! Every now and then she feels the baby kick. Pretty soon it will be time for the birth pangs that will usher a new child into the world, another baby filled with hope and promise.

Jennie is an obstetrician and gynecologist. She has delivered dozens of babies. She is well aware that rarely is a baby born without pain. For all the childbirth classes and DVD’s of meditative music, there is pain in pregnancy, and pain in the birth of a baby. In fact, it has been said that if men had to carry the second child, there would be no third children!

Rarely can we have something new in life without some dismantling of the old, some destruction, some re-creation. This fall we did a little remodeling project in our kitchen. It was not a big deal — we didn’t gut the place or anything like that, just a few cosmetic improvements. It was supposed to take a week. Well, you know what happened. You also know about the dust and the inconvenience of trying to cook with a microwave in the basement and then eating on the back porch. Now I would never compare the hassle of our kitchen project to some of the life-altering changes that have occurred in the lives of some of the people whose faces I see in our congregation today. I mention it simply to illustrate that rarely can we have something new in life without some pain, some destruction of the old.

This morning I have an idea: what if church becomes the place, not only where we get things tied down so we can focus on the permanence of God and his unconditional love for us, but also the place where we come to catch a glimpse of God’s new heaven and new earth? A woman shared with me, “When my husband died, I thought my life was over. I told God, ‘I’ve got nothing to live for now. My world is destroyed.’ But wonder of wonders, I didn’t die. I went on, not with the same life, but with a new life.” Can we see what God is creating? Are we able to look beyond the pain and the destruction and the heartache in order to feel the birth pangs of a new day?

The Gothic architects had it partly right. They wanted us to feel the sense of majesty, the sense of permanence, the sense of awe that comes with massive structures of stone and wood and glass. How much we need that inspiration and sense of permanence in our topsy-turvy lives! But the message of Jesus for us this morning is this: Don’t get too attached to this place! There’s a new world coming. Nothing is permanent; nothing lasts forever. Only God endures. Only God prevails. It is not our job simply to try to make ourselves comfortable with things the way they are. Rather, we need to ask what God is trying to create, even in the chaos, even through the pain in our lives, our community and our world.

Most of us have seen talented trapeze artists do their death-defying acts with artistry and grace. Someone has said that our Christian journey is like swinging on a trapeze. Once you have gained the courage to swing, you never want to let go. Then, without warning, you look up and see another trapeze swinging towards you, perfectly timed to meet you, and you realize you

are being asked to let go and grab onto the other trapeze. You have to release your grasp. You have to reach out. You have to experience the glorious terror of in-between-ness as you disconnect from one and reach for the other.(2)

Are you ready to let go, one finger at a time, and reach for what God has waiting for you, what God is waiting to birth in you? Have you reached the other bar yet or are you somewhere in between in that paralyzing stretch of the unknown?

My prayer is that each of us will let go and let God, that each of us will reach out and grasp for that other bar. And when we do, I am confident that we will not just make it to the other bar, but will be grasped by the hand of Jesus, who is always with us and will never let us go.

I believe God is saying to us and to all people, this world is not as I intended it to be. I'm still at work. Amidst all the problems and challenges and discouraging circumstances that we face in this life, **something new is coming**. Pain is part of life, to be sure, but part of the pain we feel is the beginning of the birth pangs of a whole new world.

Let us trust God for the future. Let us allow God to birth a new thing in our hearts and lives this day. Let us be willing to let go of whatever we are holding on to, and grasp the new life that awaits us this very day.

Prayer: Dear God, when we read the newspaper and watch television news, we are horrified by much of what we learn. Amidst all the strife and discouraging circumstances of this world, help us to see your hand at work. Help us to believe that in the pain and suffering there are the birth pangs of a new world. Help us to reach out and embrace the new life that you are creating, confident that you will be with us every step of the way. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Notes:

1. Willimon, William H. *Pulpit Resource*. Vol. 37. No. 4, p. 31.
2. Yaconelli, Mike. Quoted in *Pulpit Resource*. Vol. 37. No. 4, p. 32.