

Text: Mark 13:1-8
Title: Unraveling
Date: 11.18.18
Roger Allen Nelson

A Bhutanese folk-saying claims that to find happiness one must contemplate death five times a day. That bit of wisdom inspired the development of WeCroak, a smart phone app that reminds you five times a day that you're going to die.

Bzzzzz. Don't forget, you're going to die.

The invitation to think about death comes randomly, at any moment, just like death, and the alert is linked to a quote from a poet or philosopher writing about death. You're encouraged to take a moment for contemplation, conscious breathing, or meditation.

Matt Fitzgerald used the app. He writes this:

WeCroak inflicts a cumulative wallop. If you have strong feelings about death, it will intensify them. WeCroak will let you contemplate mortality in the abstract, but it won't stop at the conceptual. It will force you to consider the grave personally. It doesn't happen immediately. The app's effect unfolds like a slow-motion bomb, wrecking whatever defenses you've erected to protect yourself from death's sting. The bizarre thing is, WeCroak made me happy as it blew me apart. The app gets weird and intensely personal. It will mess with you.

Maybe Jesus is doing something similar.
Maybe Jesus is messing with the disciples.

As the disciples voice amazement at the size and beauty of the Jerusalem temple, Jesus says it's coming down. They're wide-eyed and slack-jawed and Jesus tells them its transitory. It's like taking your kids to Disney World and when they turn to say, "Dad, this is awesome!" You growl, "Yeah, well it's all going to burn down."

Bzzzzz. Don't forget you're going to die.

What is Jesus doing here?
What are we to make of this text?

A little history....

In the center of Jerusalem on the top of Mount Moriah there is a rock outcropping upon which Abraham was called to sacrifice Isaac. King David built an altar on or near that rock; and Solomon built and dedicated the First Temple there in 960 BC. That temple was destroyed when Nebuchadnezzar ransacked Jerusalem and exiled the Jews to Babylon. And, the Ark of the Covenant, enshrined in that First Temple, disappeared. (Only to be discovered later by Indiana Jones....)

About 500 years after the destruction of the First Temple, just before Jesus was born, Herod the Great, appointed by Rome to rule the region, rebuilt-remodeled the Second Temple on the same site. Maybe as a way to placate the Jews this temple was better than double in size than the first, with a limestone foundation and massive stone blocks that measured 12 meters by 3 meters by 4 meters. It had marble floors and walls with gold leaf highlights. The first century historian Josephus described the temple this way:

(it).... reflected so fierce a blaze of fire that those who tried to look at it were forced to turn away.... It seemed in the distance like a mountain covered in snow, for any part not covered in gold was dazzling white.

So, in our text, as Jesus and his disciples are walking away from the temple, they're a disenfranchised people under the thumb of the empire, and they're overwhelmed and awe struck by the temple. For, even though Herod built the Second Temple
it still embodied the hopes and history of the Hebrews,
it was their apparatus for sacrifice and supplication before God,
it gave them identity,
it gave physical expression to the covenant,
it was their focal point as the people of God.

And yet, Jesus responds:

Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.

A few days after 09.11 Nancy Gibbs wrote in Time Magazine, "If you want to humble an empire you attack its cathedrals." And, the awe-struck disciples were dumb-struck by what Jesus said. They couldn't believe Jesus was attacking their cathedral.

They couldn't imagine that the Temple would be destroyed.

They had signed on to see the Roman Empire overthrown not the Temple taken down.

They had signed on for life not for death.

They couldn't believe it.

So later, with the temple in sight, just across a valley, the disciples ask Jesus what he meant and Jesus launches into a little apocalypse. Jesus gives them a picture of the end of history. Bzzzzz.

Watch out... the end is still to come... these are the beginning of birth pains.

Dear friends, as we approached the mid-term elections there was a good deal of hand wringing about the strain on the American fabric. David Brooks described it as an "unraveling." In his words:

.... the two electorates tell entirely different unraveling stories. In rural America, the sources of unraveling are the immigrants (symbolized by the caravan) and the radicalized mobs of educated elites (symbolized by the media). In rural America basic values like hard work, clear gender roles and the social fabric are dissolving before people's eyes.... Urban Americans see the unraveling coming from the rising tide of

nativism, the way Trump eviscerates social norms, the underground army of alt-right extremists with guns.... Politics is no longer mainly about disagreeing on issues. It's about being in entirely separate conversations.

And, this morning, no matter what your politics, there is little to suggest that the election results repaired that unraveling. We have faced more substantial threats, both internally and externally, but there is some existential unraveling that is hard to ignore or gloss over. The Oxford Dictionary announced this week that the 2018 word of the year is “toxic.”

Things feel like they're poisonous.

Things feel like they're coming apart.

Things feel like they're dying.

Bzzzzz. Don't forget even empires die.

Maybe that's what Jesus is doing here....

Maybe Jesus is reminding the disciples that every empire dies.

Each gospel includes some sort of last speech by Jesus. And, the thrust of each speech is different depending on the gospel. For John the central point is to be united in love with Christ, for Matthew and Luke the final order is to be engaged in mission to the Gentiles, and Mark's emphasis is to watch for the coming of the Son of Man. To watch for the end. There is an apocalyptic-end-of-the-world quality in Mark. And the hope of something new being born.

So, as you have heard from this pulpit before....

The hope of the gospels is that human history has purpose and direction and that it will end in the glory of God's *shalom*. There is little suggestion in scripture that life is meant for our comfort or that things will keep getting better and better until we rollover one fine glorious morning. Instead, the language ~ even here on the lips of Jesus~ is that everything will unravel and even our cathedrals will come down. But!

But, our temples are not the focal point for the Kingdom of God. The coming, and second coming, of Jesus is the locus of our hope for the full realization of mercy, justice, peace.

The stars will begin to fall,

the trumpet will sound,

the temple will be rubble,

but God in Christ will be with his people and wipe the last tears from their eyes.

Now. That may seem like a naïve hope ~ a poet's longing when pragmatists would build bigger walls or grab more guns. And that smacks of a faith that as this world stumbles toward decay and destruction the Kingdom of God is also being born in and among us, often in unseen and unheralded ways, but no less a reality. We live in the overlapping of two ages. So, we pray for the Kingdom to come, and we work in ways that make sense to us for that coming Kingdom, and there is still an unraveling. Often times I don't know what to make of it....

But, I do know that Jesus was right.

In 70 AD the Roman Empire put down a Jewish revolt and after a long and brutal siege of Jerusalem they destroyed the Second Temple. The only stones left one upon another is a fragment of the foundation of the temple ~ what we know as today's Wailing Wall. And a top that temple mount now stands the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque ~ the third holiest site in Islam.

Last year, just before Thanksgiving, as I stood at the foundation of the Temple surrounded by Orthodox Jews rocking, praying, and reading the Torah before giant stones rubbed smooth by years of hands and tears, and just above us Muslims were preparing for prayer, while a few blocks away Christians gathered to pray at the tomb of the resurrection, I was as awestruck and dumbstruck as those first disciples walking away from the temple. For our collective future will hang in part on how we "children of Abraham" find ways to stand together in love and humility and service.

Dear friends, the essential hope of the gospel is that history has direction and purpose. And as that is true, as Jesus is coming back to fully birth the *shalom* of God, then even this present moment is radically altered ~ and it too is headed toward glory. As that is true, then every expression of death, and every unraveling, is not the last word.

For empires may rise and fall, civilizations may collide and collapse, every generation may think it's the last, trials will come, temples will tumble, and we will all die, but out of the rubble, even out of death, will stand the God of all hopefulness. And there is nothing to fear. Thanks be to God.

Matt Fitzgerald, who used the WeCroak app, learned in some fashion that being reminded of death did in fact open him up to expressions of happiness. As he knit the normality of death into his consciousness it messed with him, but listen to what he learned,

WeCroak is powerful. The app broke me open. Its daily reminders are forcing me to grieve again. If I continue using it, it will continue changing me. I'll grow to see the grave with equanimity. WeCroak is so powerful I worry that it might dry my eyes before Christ can find me again. The Buddhist and Stoic assumptions that inform WeCroak are not going to let me cry for long. And yet, tears could be the lens one needs in order to see the risen Christ. In the end it comes down to this: WeCroak thinks death is natural. Christianity says death is obscene. Worse than this; WeCroak can make you happy. But, the risen Christ can give you joy. So, delete the app!

Our hope is not in the normality of death, or the rise and fall of empires, our hope is in God in Christ and the birthing of a new creation. May we see the Kingdom of God alive among us even now and shining on the horizon of a coming day. And as I once heard a Catholic writer from Queens cry out:

Let us hold hands against the dark and tell a better story than the one told by cowards. For light will defeat darkness, and life will defeat death.

Even so, come Lord Jesus. Amen.