

Mark 13: 1-8

TOWERING BUILDINGS ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO CRUMBLE TO THE GROUND. OCEANS ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO LEAP OUT OF THEIR SEABEDS AND FLOOD MILES INLAND. THE GROUND IS NOT SUPPOSED TO SHAKE AND WAVE. THE SKY IS NOT SUPPOSED TO FORM A FUNNEL CLOUD AND DESTROY A TOWN. YET ALL WHO WATCHED THE WORLD TRADE TOWERS COLLAPSE, SEEN A TSUNAMI FLOOD A NATION, EXPERIENCED AN EARTHQUAKE, OR SUFFERED THROUGH THE POWER OF A TORNADO KNOWS THAT SUCH EVENTS HAPPEN. RED CROSS VOLUNTEERS WHO PROVIDE CARE FOR THE VICTIMS REPORT ALL EXPRESS A PROFOUND SENSE OF LOSS. NOT ONLY HAVE THEY LOST LOVED ONES AND PROPERTY, BUT IN A DEEP AND ABIDING SENSE THEY HAVE LOST THEIR INNOCENCE. THEY NOW KNOW THAT SOMETHING THEY ONCE BELIEVED TO BE SURE—THAT A TOWERING STRUCTURE WOULD STAND FOREVER, FOR INSTANCE, OR THAT THE OCEAN WOULD STAY SECURELY IN ITS SEABED—IS NO LONGER TRUSTWORTHY. THEY HAVE LOST A FOUNDATIONAL BELIEF UPON WHICH THEY ONCE BUILT THEIR LIVES. NO LONGER WILL THEY BE ABLE TO STEP ON THE GROUND WITHOUT WONDERING, IF ONLY FOR A MOMENT, WHETHER THE GROUND IS GOING TO REMAIN STABLE. NO LONGER WILL THEY BE ABLE TO LOOK UP INTO A DARKENING SKY WITHOUT WONDERING IF A DESTRUCTIVE STORM IS ON ITS WAY.

JUST THIS PAST SUMMER WORD TRAVELED QUICKLY ON WEATHER APPS AND FACEBOOK THAT THE WEATHER WAS IDEAL FOR ANOTHER DORRECHIO. AND WE ALL LISTENED AND WONDERED.

PEOPLE WHO HAVE SUFFERED MULTIPLE TRAGEDIES IN A SHORT PERIOD OF TIME OFTEN WONDER WHAT'S NEXT...WHEN WILL THE OTHER SHOE DROP?

AS JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES ARE LEAVING THE TEMPLE, THE DISCIPLE REMARK ABOUT THE LARGE STONES AND THE BUILDING THAT APPEAR IMMOVABLE. JESUS STARTLES THEM WITH HIS PREDICTION THAT EVEN THE GREAT STONES THAT FORM THE TEMPLE WILL ONE DAY BE THROWN DOWN. AS THEY SIT TOGETHER ON THE MOUNT OF OLIVES GAZING AT THE MAGNIFICENT TEMPLE, THE DISCIPLES MUST HAVE FOUND JESUS' WORDS TROUBLING, EVEN A LITTLE HARD TO IMAGINE. IT IS SHOCKING AND SURPRISING ON ONE LEVEL BECAUSE HEROD'S TEMPLE WAS SO MUCH MORE MASSIVE THAN THE EARLIER TEMPLES. IT IS SURPRISING ON ANOTHER LEVEL BECAUSE IT IS GOD'S TEMPLE, THE PLACE MANY JEWS BELIEVED TO BE THE CLOSEST POINT OF CONTACT BETWEEN GOD AND GOD'S PEOPLE. WOULD GOD ALLOW SUCH A THING TO HAPPEN TO THIS MAGNIFICENT TEMPLE? PETER, JAMES, JOHN, AND ANDREW ASK JESUS PRIVATELY WHEN HIS PREDICTION WILL COME TO PASS. IN HIS CRYPTIC STYLE, JESUS WARNS THEM NOT TO BE LED ASTRAY BY OTHERS WHO WILL COME AFTER HIM, INCLUDING SOME WHO WILL CLAIM TO SPEAK WITH JESUS' OWN AUTHORITY. JESUS TELLS THE DISCIPLES NOT TO BE WORRIED BY WARS, RUMORS OF WARS, EARTHQUAKES, OR FAMINE, AS THESE ARE SIGNS OF THE BEGINNING OF THE END. JESUS DOES NOT ANSWER THE DISCIPLES QUESTION DIRECTLY. INSTEAD, HE SETS OUT FOR THEM A WAY TO LIVE THAT DOES NOT FOCUS ALL OF THEIR ATTENTION ON THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE OR THE SECOND COMING.

THIS IS THE PROBLEM WITH THOSE WHO, INVOKING JESUS' NAME, WANT TO DRAW ALL OUR ATTENTION TO AND FOCUS ALL OUR ENERGY ON THE END OF THE AGE. NUMEROUS PUBLICATIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA SITES OFFER FORMULAS FOR INTERPRETING EVERY TRAGIC EVENT, EVERY HURRICANE, EVERY WAR, EVERY FAMIINE, EVERY TORNADO, AND EVERY EARTHQUAKE AS PART OF GOD'S PLAN FOR THE SECOND COMING OF JESUS CHRIST. VARIOUS GROUPS HAVE CREATED THEIR OWN VERSIONS OF AN END-TIME CLOCK TO TELL US HOW CLOSE WE ARE TO CHRIST'S RETURN. SOME INTERPRET EACH DAY'S EVENTS IN LIGHT OF THIS PASSAGE FROM MARK, CLAIMING SOME SECRET REVELATION ABOUT GOD'S PLAN FOR THE LAST DAYS.

JESUS' WARNING IS MORE POWERFUL THAN EVER. CERTAINLY EVERY GENERATION HAS HEARD THE VOICES OF THOSE WHO BOLDLY CLAIM THEY ARE PRIVY TO INSIDER KNOWLEDGE ABOUT WHEN CHRIST IS RETURNING. THAT IS WHAT MAKES THE SUBJECT OF END TIMES SO ATTRACTIVE AND SO TREACHEROUS. WE, LIKE THE DISCIPLES, CAN BECOME SO FOCUSED ON DISCERNING THE SIGNS OF TIMES THAT WE NEGLCT OUR MORE IMPORTANT MISSION TO WITNESS TO THE GOSPEL TODAY.

AUTHOR KATHLEEN NORRIS WRITES IN HER BOOK 'AMAZING GRACE' HOW SHE FOUND HER WAY THROUGH HER FEAR OF THE END TIMES, COMING TO REGARD CHRIST'S RETURN IN LIFE AFFIRMING WAYS. SHE WRITES: "AN ACQUAINTANCE OF MINE, A BRILLIANT YOUNG SCHOLAR, WAS STRICKEN WITH CANCER, AND OVER THE COURSE OF SEVERAL YEARS CAME CLOSE TO DYING THREE TIMES. BUT AFTER EXTENSIVE TREATMENT, BOTH RADIATION AND CHEMOTHERAPY, CAME A WELCOME REMISSION. HER PROGNOSIS WAS UNCERTAIN AT BEST, BUT SHE WAS AGAIN ABLE TO TEACH, AND TO WRITE. "I'D NEVER WANT TO GO BACK," SHE TOLD HER DEPARTMENT HEAD, AN OLDER WOMAN, "BECAUSE NOW I KNOW WHAT EACH MORNING MEANS, AND I AM SO GRATEFUL JUST TO BE ALIVE." WHEN THE OTHER WOMAN SAID TO HER, "WE'VE BEEN THROUGH SO MUCH TOGETHER IN THE LAST FEW YEARS," THE YOUNGER WOMAN NODDED, AND SMILED, "YES," SHE SAID, EMPHATICALLY. "YES! AND HASN'T IT BEEN A BLESSING!"

SO HOW DOES ONE SURVIVE THE DEVASTATION OF AN AGGRESSIVE CANCER DIAGNOSIS OR OTHER ILLNESS, THE CRASHING DOWN OF A BUILDING, OR THE AFTERMATH OF A NATURAL DISASTER? HOW DOES ONE SURVIVE THE LOSS OF A MARRIAGE? A RELATIONSHIP SEVERED? HOW DOES ONE SURVIVE ANY SORT OF TRAUMA? ADDICTION? HOW DOES ONE LIVE IN THE MIDST OF COMPETING VOICES, ALL FULL OF PASSIONATE INTENSITY, CLAIMING THAT THESE ARE SIGNS OF THE END OF THE AGE? OUR FOCUS MUST NOT BE ON THE SIGNS THEMSELVES, BUT RATHER ON THE ONE WHO IS TO COME—THE ONE WHO ENABLES US TO LOOK UP AFTER SUCH DEVASTATION AND CLAIM THE CERTAINTY OF BLESSINGS.

LET US HEAR THIS PASSAGE AS REFERRING TO JESUS' PASSION AND DEATH AS THE SPACE/PLACE WHEN GOD DRAWS NEAR TO US. GIVEN THE SITUATIONS OF OUR VERY LIVES...INDIVIDUALLY, COLLECTIVELY, PERHAPS THE QUESTION IS: GIVEN THE SITUATION, NOW WHAT? WHAT AM I CALLED TO DO? WHAT ARE WE CALLED TO DO?

JESUS IS TELLING THE DISCIPLES THAT HE'S NOT TALKING ABOUT AN ENDING BUT ABOUT A BEGINNING, THE BIRTHING OF NEW LIFE. A MESSAGE MANY NEED TO HEAR WHEN IT LOOKS

AS IF SO MANY THINGS ARE COMING APART AT THE SEEMS. OUR GOSPEL READING IS ABOUT HOPE..ABOUT POSSIBILITIES. IT'S A GOSPEL READING ABOUT YOUR FUTURE AND MY FUTURE. AND WHO AMONG DOESN'T SOMETIMES WONDER, WORRY, OR EVEN BECOME ALARMED ABOUT OUR FUTURES...OUR TOMORROWS...

JESUS IS COMPASSIONATE AND SPEAKS WITH SUCH REASSURANCE. "DO NOT BE ALARMED." "THIS MUST TAKE PLACE." "THIS IS BUT THE BEGINNING OF BIRTH PANGS." IT'S AS IF HE IS SAYING, "DON'T WORRY. THIS IS NORMAL. YOU'RE GOING TO BE OK. I AM WITH YOU AND WILL GET YOU THROUGH THIS." WHAT IF, IN THOSE TIMES WHEN IT FEELS LIKE LIFE IS SHIFTING AND SEPARATING AND EVERYTHING IS BEING THROWN DOWN, WE WOULD TRUST JESUS TO PUSH AHEAD? PUSH AHEAD WITH FAITH, PUSH AHEAD WITH HOPE, PUSH AHEAD WITH LOVE, PUSH WITH ANTICIPATION OF SOMETHING NEW. ANYTHING IN YOUR LIFE FEELS LIKE IT'S SHIFTING? SEPARATING? BEING TOREN APART? SILENTLY LET US PRAY...ASKING JESUS TO HELP US PUSH AHEAD, TRUSTING HE IS WITH US.....