

St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
Albuquerque, New Mexico  
Sunday November 18, 2018 Proper 28B  
Text: Mark 13: 1-8  
Preacher: Christopher McLaren  
Theme: On God Holding Us in the In-between

The disciples are impressed by the grandeur and power of the Temple in Jerusalem, like walking the city streets of New York looking at the skyscrapers. The Temple was an enormous and beautiful edifice. But it was more than that, it was a symbol of a whole way of life. The Temple was the religious and economic center of Israel. The disciples look at the Temple in wonder thinking it is "too big to fail."

To be sure the Temple was all the people of Israel had left of a past era of national sovereignty and strength. Jerusalem was no longer the capital of a great nation as it was in the time of David or Solomon, now it was a vassal state, subjugated by the Roman legions and dominated by their political efficiency. Israel paid tribute and did not rule their land.

But Jesus sees a very different reality. He sees a system that is failing and an edifice that, although strong and beautiful, is already showing signs of crumbling. Jesus announces the coming failure of this beloved way of life and it shocks and disturbs the disciples. Taking up a place opposite the Temple on the Mount of Olives, understood as a posture of judgment, Jesus speaks of a coming crisis, of a threatening change. As a country, it feels like we too are in the midst of a crisis. As senseless violence continues to make itself know, fires displace thousands from their beloved home on the beautiful coast of California- how could Malibu burn? Fierce storms come with alarming frequency displacing thousands. Political gridlock and attacks upon democracy and civility unhinge us. Freedoms we hold dear seem endangered while minorities and the most vulnerable seem even more at risk in the growing tide of white nationalism, hate crimes, and anti-immigrant sentiment. We wonder if things will turn even darker?

We can understand Jesus' words perhaps. This apocalyptic speech of Jesus is not so hard to accept perhaps. Jesus' words are not all that comforting. It's like a seminary friend of mine from Tennessee who once introduced a story he was telling me by saying, "Christopher, think of the worst thing you can think and then think worse." Things will get worse before they get better. And the failure of the Temple will have far reaching effects that are hard to imagine, both political and cosmic for the people of Israel. There are no rose-colored classes here, things are about to fall apart to become a crisis but the proper way to think of it is not as "The End" but rather as the beginning of the new. The death of this way of life is actually the birth of a new way. "These are only the birth pangs," says Jesus.

**One of our core beliefs as Christians is that God is always making things new, even when it is hard to see it, even when we are not sure that we can sense it.**

This odd and unsettling story about Jesus is about the practice of faith, that God is actually at work, making all things new, even when it doesn't look that way.

I suspect that this passage is actually closer to home than most of us realize. Many of us have actually experienced this kind of major collapse that Jesus is speaking of in our own lives whether it be socially, economically, physically, or spiritually. Many of us know suffering, perhaps not in such a huge way as Jesus is predicting but we have undergone deep crisis: the automobile accident that changed everything, the death of a loved one, the round of layoffs, the scan that showed the tumor, or the announcement that the relationship was ending, the shocking violence that no one can really comprehend. No one escapes crisis. Unscheduled and traumatic change is a part of our lives. And the truth is that most of us don't just get over it or land on our feet quickly. It takes time and interior work to engage the loss of the old and to find the courage to embrace the new.

The change part of this equation can happen quickly but it takes time to work through things and transition to a new equilibrium. Transition as many of you know involves grieving over the loss, feeling adrift or untethered for a while, like things will never be the same again, and then beginning to envision something new. One of the difficulties in transition is that when one is truly in the midst of it, it is hard to envision something new.

Transition from the old to the new, has been characterized as the moment when a trapeze artist has let go of one bar and has not yet grabbed hold of the next bar. It is what some have called midair living. **Midair living is uncomfortable.** The identity we had before is missing. We may experience depression at the loss or sense of malaise or disinterest in things for a while. If you've ever gone through a period of deep transition you know what I'm talking about. People may describe you as not being yourself. And the truth is you may be different and difficult in transition. Perhaps you eat a little too much or not enough. You lose interest in things you once loved or have trouble focusing. Work can become a challenge as you go through the motions. Maybe you drink too much or spend an inordinate amount of time at the bar. Midair living can bring its share of confusion. We find ourselves silent when we should be talking and talking when we should be silent. We start things that we can't finish and even try to finish things we didn't start. It's an awkward in-between time when we are tired of our friends asking us how we are and hurt when they don't ask us how we are doing. Each of us could probably describe this midair living by telling stories of our own lives. We've been there or been through it with those we love. We say things like, "It's a tough time for him right now." "Things are such a mess that she doesn't really know who she is." "He so confused right not he doesn't know his [derriere] from his elbow." As one writer expressed it, "Welcome to confusion so profound it is anatomical."

Transitions can be so unsettling that we have a hard time finding the value in the in-between time. We are tempted to look toward the future trusting in our innate resiliency. Our friends tell us things like, "Hang in there you'll make it through this."

Or “Life goes on and so will you.” The advice sounds so helpful and normal. We ourselves think this way often, no matter how devastating the loss may be, we will find a way through it. We will adapt and find a new normal. Our lives will become stable again and even if we can’t get completely over the loss, we can find a way to get beyond it.

**However, there is a very different way to look at midair living. Spiritual teachers have a different tackle on the problem. They say, “Don’t hurry to a new security.”** They believe that there is value in the struggle and floundering of the in-between time. The real potential is not in landing safely as soon as possible but in the midair living.

For those of us prone to fixing things and moving on this is difficult advice. The wisdom tradition understands this in-between time as an opportunity to discover that we are more than what is happening to us. Yes, we go through times of great struggles and transition but we also transcend it. As children of God we are not only buffeted by the chances and changes of this temporal life, we are also related to the unchanging eternal order.

I once heard Bishop Mathes from San Diego say that “A crisis is a terrible thing to waste.” I believe that he was saying that crisis opens us up to a new spiritual potential. When we are stable and safe in a physical, psychological and social life we are often unaware of deeper spiritual truth. However, when disruption occurs, when everything we thought was solid is torn down or a wound is opened up, we often find that an invitation to change makes itself known in the midst of the transition. As we let go of one bar and float for just a moment toward a new stability something new has a chance to take hold in our lives. In that midair time, between earthly stability, we may find that we are able to shift our awareness toward our connection with God. It is a time that is rich with spiritual potential if only we are willing to live within it. **We are more than the crisis we are in. Our soul has a connection beyond the here and now that can enrich our present.**

Discovering this requires that we trust God to provide what we need in the midst of the transition if we don’t try to hurry through it. John Shea points out that in the mystical biblical tradition this in-between time is understood in connection with the third day of creation. On that day God drew up out of the waters dry land and separated “the waters under the sky” from the dry land (Gen. 1:9,13). The waters symbolize the formlessness and turmoil of transition. The appearance of dry land gives humans a place to stand in the midst of the swift and dangerous currents. What God did on the third day of creation, God does every day. **Divine reality is always supplying a place to stand.** And we need this divine grounding most when we are in moments of transition and have lost our human grounding, when we are in midair. (John Shea)

There is so much more to each of us than meets the eye or the labels that we place upon ourselves. Listen to the writing of Beatrice Bruteau about this need within us:

Don't we superficially answer the question, "Who are you?" by citing our occupation, our relation to spouse or parent or child, or nationality, our religion, our race, our wealth, our fame, our achievement, our perhaps some special feature that looms large in our social life such as sexual orientation, or some physical or mental handicap, or a drug dependency, or a prison record? This is often how we think of ourselves and other people... However, all those descriptions are mere combinations of appearances in our experiences. They change constantly. That's not what we mean by a real self. The real self is what is back of all those descriptions, quite independent of them. ("Global Spirituality and the Integration of East and West" Cross Currents 35 [1985] 194-95).

**The deep truth is that we are more than what is happening to us. We are more than the crisis we are in.** If we will allow ourselves to live in midair when moments of transition present themselves, we are likely to discover something new about our souls, and about the lover of souls. If we will resist trying to fashion our own solid ground immediately and savor the moment in-between the first bar and the one arriving, we may discover that God is offering us a place to stand that we did not expect. This is what contemplative waiting is all about, allowing God to speak something new into your life. But we have to slow down to hear it, make room for it to take root, not rush to a new normal too quickly without become open and reflective. Crisis is a terrible thing to waste.

Oh, I know none of us can live like this all the time and we wouldn't want to, that is not the point. The point is to be open to the new, to realize that spiritual insight is available to us in awkward times, in times of loss. We aren't always aware of the spiritual dimension in our lives. In fact, sometimes we promptly forget it when our crisis is over or we've found a new equilibrium.

As the Sufi poet Rumi expressed it:

*enjoy this being washed  
with a secret we sometimes know,  
and then not.*

But that does not diminish the deep value of discovering one's relatedness to God in the in-between times. To know that we belong to God in a transcendent way, in a way that holds us in life is something to be treasured in our hearts as a sustaining fire. This is the gift of midair living, of letting go of the bar and entering the sustaining love of God. Don't be afraid to let go of the bar and let God hold you in the in-between.

*Note: I'm deeply indebted to John Shea for his commentary and insight into this passage which has informed this sermon on midair living.*