

Mark 13:1-8, 24-37
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The Church's One Foundation

This morning's text picks up where we left off last week. It is Tuesday of Holy Week, only two days after Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. It is only a day after he has upended the tables and disrupted life within the Temple walls, and it is only moments after he has pointed out the religious leaders' hypocrisy and the widow's sacrificial offering. Jerusalem's population has more than doubled as pilgrims have made their way to the city for Passover. The air crackles, much as it does just before a summer storm. Everyone is on edge. [Mark 13: 1-8, 24-37]

When he was a kid, my husband Dave had a group of friends who roamed his neighborhood in Birmingham, Alabama riding bikes, playing football, always looking for adventure. One evening, Dave's next-door neighbors, the Tylers heard loud, rhythmic tapping just outside their window.¹ Mr. Tyler walked out to find eight-year-old Dave assisting his buddy Tom as he tapped a large bolt against the blocks that made up the crawl space. They were curious about what they could find on the other side of the bricks. Mr. Tyler didn't yell at them, but he did tell them to stop. It would be hard for a couple of kids to do too much damage to an entire foundation, but even a steady chipping away could undermine the structure if it went on for too long.

A few weeks ago, we heard Jesus tell a parable about a vineyard and about the failure of those tending the vineyard to do the job they had been hired to do. He also spoke about God's

¹ The names of Dave's neighbors have been changed.

building something new with a cast-off rock as its cornerstone. The religious leaders rightly understood that Jesus was addressing them and their failure to tend faithfully to the ones God had entrusted to their care. Jesus has just stood toe to toe with some of these same leaders in the Temple, the center of ancient Israel's identity and life. He has sparred with them about what it means to do what God has always called them to do—love God and love neighbor. And he has pointed out a widow who gave her last two cents to uphold a broken system, perhaps because those same leaders had convinced her that such a sacrificial gift was a good and holy one to offer.

And yet, the very first thing the disciples point out on their way out of the Temple is the impressively large stones that form its walls. Jesus has just demonstrated how corrupt the system has become and yet the disciples cannot help themselves. Quickly forgetting the new thing God wants to build on an overlooked stone, one that is not big or impressive by the larger world's standards, the disciples seem to gawk like tourists at the Temple's massive building blocks. It's understandable of course. The stones are massive and required the labor of thousands to stack them one upon another. The size and strength of the walls of the Temple reinforce the image of power and invite awe and reverence. And yet, Mark's first hearers have witnessed—or soon will witness the rubble that a destroyed Temple leaves behind. Neither grand walls nor massive stones can stand forever; neither grand walls nor massive stones form a lasting foundation for the work of God. Instead, Jesus insists, it is his words that last. Jesus Christ, the Word of God, who persists. We sing that the church's one foundation is Jesus Christ, our Lord. And in the next few verses, that foundation will find himself at the mercy of Roman

and religious authorities, the very ones who want to tear him down and bury him once and for all.

In the midst of the walls tumbling down, Jesus warns the disciples to be wary of others who claim to be the Messiah. This is not the gentle Jesus soft and mild we may have been hoping for. He goes on to describe cataclysmic events—wars, earthquakes, rumors of wars, persecution, siblings turning on siblings, parents and children turning on one another. And more false messiahs leading even the most faithful astray. And Jesus tells them, tells us not to be alarmed and to pay attention, to stay alert, because we the church still have a job to do.

Well, Jesus, that's just lovely. Walls crumble at every turn. Families and communities are divided and divisive. Even creation is unsettled and on edge, and we're supposed to keep calm and carry on? Yes, in fact. I don't think Jesus blames us when these things rattle us. When an angel appears to the shepherds and tells them not to be afraid, of course, they're afraid. Of course, we are alarmed when everything is in an uproar. Jesus wants the disciples, the church to be alert and watchful, because Jesus calls us not to be stymied by alarm, not to be mired in panic, not to be defined by fear, not to be led astray into thinking our job has changed.

Mark's earliest hearers saw rubble everywhere they turned. They endured divisions within their faith communities and families because of their devotion to Jesus. Rome destroyed the Temple and the whole of Jerusalem around 70 CE. Those grand building blocks were nothing more than ruins. There must have been more than a few moments when Mark's community worried that they had gotten it wrong, that they had gotten Jesus wrong. Following the Messiah had not put them on a path of comfort or success or safety. Theirs did not look like a blessed life by the larger world's standards. Jesus wants them—and us—to understand that a destroyed

Temple is not the end of the story. Bricks and mortar have never been the church's foundation. The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord, then, now, and always.

When I came to town for my interview, the search committee, Dave, and I went on a tour through the buildings here on campus and finished here in the sanctuary. While everyone else climbed up into the clock tower, I stayed behind in the choir loft. I did not want to embarrass myself by tumbling off the rungs of the ladder, and I wanted a chance to sit in this place in silence, to imagine what it might be like to serve in this place. I took a deep breath and offered up a prayer for guidance as I tried to imagine how it would feel—if I was in fact offered the position—how it would feel not simply to preach from this pulpit in this lovely, light-filled space, but to serve among you—a host of people and stories I had yet to meet. In that moment and in the hours that followed, I felt a stirring sense of what might be next, about who God might be calling us to be together. And I was reminded that a call to serve here was about more than bricks and mortar. It was about the small part of the Body of Christ who gathers in this place and goes out from this place. We have been housed here for almost one hundred years, but this building has never contained us or defined us. The foundation God has built here in Christ Jesus has been the ground floor for every neighbor served through Cooperative Christian Ministries, the slab for every house built by Habitat for Humanity, the footers for the bridge we helped build in Haiti. Christ is the cornerstone of every welcome offered to a stranger, every reconciled relationship, every risk taken in the name of love. Christ is the foundation of every can of food placed in the Blessing Box, every meal served at the night shelter, every child baptized at this font, and every saint whose resurrection we celebrate when they die. The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord. Not simply as we worship and sing and weep

and laugh and play and pray within this block between Union and Church Streets but everywhere and anywhere we go.

In Dave's telling, Mr. Tyler wasn't all that alarmed by the two neighborhood goofballs hammering away at the foundation of his home. He probably realized that they couldn't do too much damage with a few child-sized taps. The threats surrounding Mark's community on the other hand were enough to tumble the Temple, and yet the church's foundation remained solid, unblemished. The vitriol, the meanness, and the threats swirling around us cannot undo our foundation either. Jesus Christ, the Son of God is still our foundation. He is our unfailing and ever-faithful cornerstone. Mark wants his community and us to hear that assurance, to absorb that fact deep in our core. And, with that assurance, Jesus through the voice of Mark also calls us to remember that while we watch, while we wait, we still have a job to do.

Remember, Jesus and the disciples have just walked out of the Temple as he is speaking. Mere hours have passed since he spoke with the scribe. It has only been a few moments since he has asserted that the greatest commandment is to love God and love neighbor. It is that simple and that hard. We have a job to do: love God and love neighbor. Yes, the world is on edge. Yes, the rhetoric, the threats, and the bluster are frightening. And yes, we are still called to love God and love our neighbors—every single one of our neighbors, even the ones who frighten or anger us the most, maybe especially the ones who frighten or anger us the most. We still have a job to do, even as the walls crumble around us, even as everything we thought we could count on begins to waver. Fear is not in our job description. It is not one of our essential functions. Fear does not define us. Meanness does not define us. Vengefulness does not define

us. Hope does. Courage does. Humility does. Compassion does. Sacrifice does. Love does. Christ does.

Over the next few days in Mark's text, we read all that Jesus endures as he gives himself over to suffering and death at the hands of those who fear him and seek to destroy the kingdom he ushers in, to bury this troublesome cornerstone once and for all. Spoiler alert: it does not work. As a beloved hymn has Jesus proclaim, "I am the life that will never, never die. I'll live in you if you'll live in me." The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord. Nothing can chip away at that. Nothing.

Thanks be to God. Amen.