TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“Impressive” Mark 13:1-8*

Although I do count my blessings on a regular basis, I must admit: occasionally, I find myself doing it’s opposite.  I also find myself meandering down a list of regrets, the things I “could-a,” “would-a,” should-a” done.  Most of us have such lists.

One item that often makes the top of my list is math—mathematics.  I wish I had been better at math.  I “could-a” spent more time working at it.  I “should-a” gotten myself more tutoring in it.  You see, if I “could-a” been better at math then, just maybe, I could have gone into something I have always found fascinating and inspiring: architecture!

I love nature.  I love rolling prairies, towering mountains, deep, dark forests and the like, but I also find myself enthralled by cities.  In a big city with lots of skyscrapers, I will literally stand on street corners and gawk at the buildings.  I may as well have a big sign stamped across my forehead that says “tourist.”  And I am quite equal in my affection for all sorts of building types.  From the shiny ultramodern, to the most elaborate, baroque, to the brutalist cement boxes of the last century, I am awestruck by them all.

Sometimes the sheer size grabs my attention, but I am also impressed by the thought and detail that goes into architecture, good architecture.  I am moved when the architect has managed reflect the spirit of the time and society she has designed for, the ethos that has been captured, the hopes that have been infused into these buildings, or the confidence and the striving that has been expressed through them.

Of course, I am sharing all of this with you because of what we have just heard about the disciples as they accompany Jesus in the Temple.  I have finally found something I canshare with the disciples. They seem to be as impressed by the buildings around them as I often am.  In the passage we just heard, the disciples are deeply impressed by the buildings they are seeing—by the Temple and the temple complex.

They come out of the Temple a little dazed by what they have just seen: the huge stones that have been quarried, transported, and set into walls that soar above them, and configured into rooms larger than anything they have seen before; courtyards that were probably bigger than some of the villages they came from.  What grandeur! What riches on display!  How amazing it all is!  Who could compete with such power?

It is at this point there are two things I would like us to remember.  The first is that Jesus did not call his disciples from the top echelon of society.  He did not call rich men with big titles and big, opulent homes.  Jesus called working men, men who did not have a lot of sophistication or experience beyond their village or their occupation.

While some of them may have been to Jerusalem for high holy days, most would not have had the time to truly appreciate their surroundings, to study and reflect on the richness of the homes, the places of government, nor the palace Herod had made for himself.

And then there was the Temple.  Most of us have seen pictures of the buildings and the courtyards—their artist renderings at this point—the towering height and the expansiveness of the structure are amazing just by themselves.  How ancient people, who did not have the kind of technology we have today, were able to move and manipulate huge building materials—this is a phenomenon that intrigues scientists and archeologists even today.  How they were able to do what they did is still studied. It is still impressive.

And that is just the *outside* of the buildings.  What we do not get to see is the way in which the Temple and the other grand buildings were decorated on the *inside*.

I have looked for pictures depicting what the inside of the Temple might have looked like.  There are not very many.  However, archaeologists have seen evidence of things like: huge, color-saturated murals, and furniture made of precious woods.  There would also have been rich tapestries and carpets to adorn and impress, as well as sacred vessels for libations, to hold offerings, and use in the many yearly rituals.

I think we can all imagine just how awesome this must have been for men from such humble backgrounds.  It is not so very different from what most of us do when we go on vacation to some exotic place.  We are modern people, yet we are still able to be as impressed as were the disciples who traveled with Jesus. Which is why I still find myself on street corners gawking at buildings.

The second thing I would like us to remember is the significance of the Temple in Jewish life.

The Temple is the place where the holiest of holies were supposed to dwell.  The Ark of the Covenant was housed there.  Everything that the Israelites held righteous and sacred was centered there. All of their most sacred rituals were enacted there in the Temple—every prayer and sacrifice which was central to their worship, and their connection to God.

In a very real sense, the Temple was the very identity of the Hebrew people.  It was their heart and soul as a people.  So, when Jesus tells the disciples that the stones they have just marveled over will come crashing down and the great temple complex will be left in rubble and ruin, this was a much more pain and grief-inspiring statement than you and I usually grasp.  The destruction of their temple had been linked to the exile and devastation of the Hebrew people not once, but twice.

In our largely disposable society, we are used to seeing buildings come down. We even make special events of the destruction of buildings. Even the largest are more-or-less temporary. We accept that, and we can understand that it takes mighty machinery or acts of nature to level a large stone building, but the horror and generational trauma-induced shock the disciples would likely have experienced at Jesus’ remark is mostly beyond us.

The closest we have come to the kind of horror the disciples would have experienced, of course, happened in this country about twenty years ago, on September 11th.

Let that date settle into your minds for a moment. Most of us remember where we were and what we were doing when the Twin Towers fell. Most of us remember watching over and over again the videos of the airplanes and the falling debris…and bodies.

Peter, James, John, and Andrew probably felt something close to that, but add to that the significance of their life with God. Allow yourself to ponder what it would have meant to think of the very house of everything you hold sacred being threatened.

And so, they begin to press Jesus for details. If they know more, they think, perhaps they can avert the coming tragedy, protect their families and fellow faithful. If they knew all of these things then perhaps they could take control of the situation—*there, that is the goal*.

Let us regain control.

We are an impressive people who have managed to erect these impressive structures through our intellect, our wealth, our sheer sense of purpose and determination. We are masters of our destiny—we are a chosen people, a shining city on a hill.

While I do not believe Jesus wanted the disciples—or us—to belittle the use of the many gifts God has given us, I do believe he wanted the disciples to guard against the very human tendency to become over-confident, or to be too easily impressed—for good or ill—by what they see around them.

I believe Jesus wanted them to stop, and ask themselves: just what impresses me about all of this wealth and grandeur?

The fact of the matter is: we human beings are rather easily impressed by other human beings. And while I do not believe there is anything wrong with celebrating with others the many big and little achievements we come by, it is also important to remember that all human efforts have a finite lifespan to them. What I mean is that, while the things we do and accomplish are often impressive, it is a mistake to assign them the qualities of perfection and permanence.

That is what Jesus was doing in this passage. He was redirecting the disciples’ attention away from the work of human hands, and toward the God who lives in the vision, the skill, and the **willpower and resolve that brought such projects to completion. It is that spirit that we can only approximate—even in our finest work, and so a healthy amount of humility is appropriate.**

**Finally, and most importantly, Jesus was also helping safeguard the disciples from being too impressed by the evil that humans do, too. In the days to come, this is going to be especially important as they experience the seeming loss of their friend and teacher.**

**Do not be impressed by the power and brutality of the empire, says Jesus. Do not give-up hope. Indeed, Jesus is calling them to remain attentive to the way in which God is still moving through their lives. We are to wait and listen for the voice of life to respond to the voices of destruction and division.**

**Out of the labor pangs of birth, new life—which only God can create—new life will come forth, it is coming forth even now.**

**One of the things that has been impressed upon me this past week is just how tired so many of us are. We are tired of the pandemic. We are tired of wearing these masks and not being able to sing together. We are tired of all the fighting and tension about the pandemic, and about so many other issues that seems to be so prevalent in our world, and our lives.**

**What Jesus tells us in this passage is that something more is going on. Something far more infectious. We do not yet know what it is, but something new is coming into the world.** Instead of fear and tension, our response must rise from the certainty that God is still good, and wants good for us,

So, this passage reminds us that our faith calls us to trust and patience about what our God can do, even in the most dire of circumstances. We are existing through the birth pangs of change; a new way to be church, a new way to be community, a new way to be neighbors.

We are still together—God has kept us together. So my prayer is that we will all take heart in this and continue on refreshed and encouraged. The Spirit is at work—be impressed by that!

May it be so. Amen.