

“New Beginnings”

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Scripture: Mark 13:1-8

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I've just begun reading a book by biologist E. O. Wilson titled *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*. He doesn't have a whole lot of good news to share, as you might imagine. Wilson states in the first chapter, "Scientists estimate that if habitat conversion and other destructive human activities continue at their present rates, half the species of plants and animals on Earth could be either gone or at least fated for early extinction by the end of the century." When I read something like that I just want to go somewhere and cover my head and hope I can make it through alive.

Of course we've been hearing about this reality for a very long time. But imagine if it were a brand new revelation. How might you receive it if you thought everything was okay? I ask that because I'm trying to imagine how the disciples must have felt when Jesus told them the temple was going to be destroyed. We don't really appreciate the centrality of the temple for Jewish life at the time of Jesus' ministry. Everything was focused on the temple. Several times a year people made a pilgrimage to the temple to bring the first fruits of their harvest, to celebrate the Passover, to have children dedicated. The temple was believed to be the seat of God. That's not to say God was nowhere else, but there was no doubt that God was present at the temple.

It must have seemed ludicrous to the disciples, devout Jews all of them, to think of the temple collapsing. So it must have been a terrible, terrible blow to the people of Judea when that collapse actually occurred in 70 AD. How do you make sense of something like that? What do you do when the central element of your faith, the one place toward which you orient your life, is suddenly taken away? The Romans could not have done anything more humiliating, more damaging, to the Jews than to destroy the temple. It must have seemed like the end of everything.

Many scholars believe that the Gospel of Mark was written some time very close to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. The early Christians regarded themselves, and were regarded by their neighbors, as a sect of Judaism. For the most part they continued to practice the customs of Jewish faith. And certainly there was a close relationship among scattered communities in the Roman Empire with the core community in Jerusalem. And even though Paul, the most active evangelist to the gentile world, believed it was no longer necessary for Christians to follow Jewish customs, that view was still not widely accepted. The temple still held special significance for Christians.

So what were they to make of its destruction? What were the people of Mark's community to think when they heard about the devastation? It must have been very tempting to run someplace and hide. It must have been hard not to give into their fears and hitch their wagons to anyone who claimed to have the answers. We see that happening even now, don't we? When events seem to point to some sort of cataclysmic end of history, people flock to

anyone who offers to take over the thinking for them. “Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray.” My wife, Beth, can remember stories her grandparents used to tell her about folks being convinced to sell their homes and their possessions and gather on a hill in West Virginia waiting for the end to come. And I’m sure we can all name a few we’ve heard about in the news from Jim Jones to David Koresh.

But what I hear in this portion of Mark’s Gospel isn’t a call to run away or to give up thinking. It’s just the opposite. I hear an invitation for us to become more fully engaged, to become more thoughtful, and never to allow fearful circumstances to overwhelm us. What was it we just sang over and over: “Lord, in you I trust. You are my God.”

History teaches us that not even the most devastating loss could destroy faith. The destruction of the temple should have spelled the end of Judaism, but it didn’t. Jewish belief re-defined the temple and its place in Jewish life. The physical temple, while always revered, would be remembered through the spiritual temple of the heart; sacrifices at the altar would be replaced by prayers at the family hearth. For Christians the physical temple of Jerusalem would be replaced by Christ himself as the One in whom God resides. So events that appeared to signal the end of all things would lead to new beginnings for Jews and Christians as their paths diverged and they each were transformed.

For every end contains within it a new beginning, every death a resurrection. I’m hopeful that’s where E. O. Wilson will head in his book. I’ve already had a hint of that as he describes the rehabilitation of the Boston Harbor Islands where new beginnings have emerged because of a wastewater filtration system used to clean the harbor waters that were ranked the most polluted in America in 1985. Whether we’re able to do that on a larger scale for the whole planet depends, I suppose, on our ability to remain engaged and thoughtful and not to let our fears get the better of us.

It would be easy to look at our world so full of wars and rumors of war, so racked by earthquake and famine and disease, to look at all that and throw up our hands in despair, to do nothing but carry signs around saying, “The end is near!” But the more I encounter the God revealed in scripture, the more I’m convinced that God isn’t finished with us yet. As Paul writes in Romans, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.” Our future is bound to the whole creation, and surely God hasn’t given up on it.

So there’s hope for us...even now. It may mean letting go of much we cherish or even regard as sacred, but new beginnings await us if we have the courage and trust to take hold of them and give them life.

Amen