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We are all amazed at natural wonders that exist in our incredibly beautiful world. But we also get amazed at humanmade structures that due to size, architecture or design leave us awestruck. Cathedrals have a way of mesmerizing us but there probably isn't a country that isn't known for one particular building - their icon. France has the Eiffel Tower, England, Big Ben, The Brandenburg Gate in Germany, Statue of Liberty in the US, The Taj Mahal in India, the Pyramids in Egypt, Burj Khalifa in Dubai which is the tallest building in the world just to name a few of these icons.

When you think about all these wonderful structures it's no wonder that one of the disciples said to Jesus about the Temple, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings." The temple was a magnificent building rebuilt by Herod the Great in the first century. The temple itself occupied a platform twice as large as the Coliseum and four times as large as the Athenian Acropolis. Herod reportedly used so much gold to cover the outside walls that anyone who gazed at them in bright sunlight risked blinding themselves.

Forty years ago I had the privilege of going to one of the archaeological digs under the current city of Jerusalem where some of the original stones of the temple still remain. Some of them measure 42' long by 11' high by 14' wide weighing over 600 tons. So, for the disciples to mention that these were large stones is almost an understatement. It's no wonder the disciples were impressed. What the disciples see is an architectural marvel but it's also the biggest, boldest, and most unshakeable symbol of God's presence they're capable of imagining.

For the disciples those massive stones hold religious memory. The Temple was at the center of their religious life; their worship; prayer, priestly activities, rituals and their system of animal sacrifice which was an attempt to make themselves acceptable to God. The temple symbolized the Jewish people's identity. The stones offered the faithful a potent symbol of spiritual glory, pride, and worthiness. In short, what takes the disciple's breath away as they gaze at the temple is the religious certainty and permanence those glittering stones displayed to the world.

That's what the disciple sees. But what does Jesus see? Jesus says, "Look this is all going to end". He sees ruins. Rubble. Destruction. Fragility, not permanence. Loss, not glory. Change, not stability. "Not one stone will be left here upon another," Jesus tells the stunned disciple. "All will be thrown down." Now for Jesus to tell them that no stone would be left there and that this great building would be thrown down seems absolutely impossible to them.

This passage from Mark's Gospel is often described as apocalyptic. If you're like me, when I hear the word apocalypse, I think of interplanetary warfare, zombies lurching through decimated neighborhoods, and nuclear destruction of the planet.

However, as we're almost two years into a global pandemic with many of the world's nations undergoing alarming events of flood and fire, alarming climate changes, famine, wars, and social unrest it feels like this is an apocalypse. We are living through times in which it seems that many of the structures we have known - have marveled at - are coming undone.

In nearly every aspect of our lives - home, work, school, and social settings - we find ourselves in profound discomfort, called on to construct new ways of being together

- that leave us feeling at least a little bit disoriented, frustrated, and longing for a past world which, while not perfect, was a world in which we knew the patterns, knew for the most part how we fit in, and in which we believed we knew at least the general shape of the future. Yet, even the most non-anxious among us might wonder, "Is the world ending?"

As I said, it has been conventional wisdom to understand Jesus' predictive words about terrible times as pointing to the end of the world and the end of history. But in fact, "apocalypse" means something quite different. An apocalypse is an unveiling or an uncovering. It's a disclosure of something secret and hidden. To experience an apocalypse is to experience fresh sight, honest disclosure and a new revelation. It is to capture reality as we've never captured it before.

In this sense, what Jesus offers his disciples is an apocalyptic vision. He invites them to look beyond the grandeur of the temple, and recognize that God cannot be domesticated. The temple is not the epicenter of God's salvific work for God is not bound by mortar and stone. God exceeds every edifice, every institution, every mission statement, every strategic plan, and every symbol human beings create in God's name. Moreover, God is not enslaved to superlatives; we're the ones easily seduced by the biggest, the newest, and the shiniest.

Jesus is pointing to the power of beginning again as the real story of God, whose creation is not fixed but endlessly evolving. Let's look at it this way. We know that America is a creation of immigrants who arrived here when the life they had known was shattered, by war, by despots, by shifting political winds, by rising tides of hatred and even natural disasters. Many of us are children of first or second generation immigrants. It takes incredible courage – even more than courage, it takes faith – to begin life again. But immigrants aren't the only ones who need courage and faith to begin again. Ask the wounded vets whose shattered bodies endure unceasing pain. Ask all the families who have someone in prison now. Ask the children in the foster-care system. Ask people struggling with addiction. Ask those who are dealing with severe medical conditions. Ask all those who lost homes in fires and floods this year. Ask those who have been profoundly impacted by the pandemic. They all struggle with the world caving in around them and it is in the midst of all this despair that Jesus talks about new beginnings.

When Jesus says 'this is but the beginning of the birth pangs' he is basically telling us that in the midst of whatever disaster we find ourselves in and the anguish that it brings that it is the end of labor. To put it into terms of childbirth what happens after labor ends but birth.

So, this passage is talking about an end but also a new beginning. Yes, in our lifetime many things will end but we also have to look for what it gives birth too. Jesus urged the disciples that during all the turmoil and difficulties they will experience to have hope and to endure because they were about to enter into a new stage of their lives that would give birth to something new.

I believe that what the disciples were to find out after the fall of the temple in 70 AD was that their faith was not so much a principle, or a number of ritual acts but was primarily a relationship with God in the person of Jesus. The Christian Faith is a Christ centered faith. Christ came to bring us a Way of Life. That's why the earliest Christians were known as followers of "The Way". It is a way of life and relationship that we continue to have through the Spirit. It is the way of compassionate love for all people.

In a lot of respects the cry of humanity today is for this kind of renewal of faith. Jesus' words about birth pangs urge us to invest our awe in hope not in the old stone structures of the past. There are new possibilities for the future: the church needs to embrace new possibilities and stop relying on the same old way of doing things. New possibilities for a wonderful life are never made of stone but is born of the power of life itself to dream dreams and see visions of God's world. Jesus' eye never wavered from this vision: it's not the end, but a time of new hope and possibilities.

Let us remember that this is a time of new hope and possibilities and that we are bearers of Christ's compassionate love, and we bring this light of hope whenever or wherever we give birth to it. Amen.