

Thanks for Nothing!
Mark 13:1-8
November 19, 2006

As Jesus and the disciples walked out of the Temple in Jerusalem, Jesus paused, looked back at the Temple and predicted, “Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone will be left on another.” For the disciples this was an inconceivable idea. Nothing could bring down those walls. “Look, teacher!” they said, “What massive stones! What magnificent buildings.” And they were right – they were massive and magnificent. It is estimated that the smallest stones in the Temple structure weighed 2-3 tons. Many of them weighed as much as 50 tons. The largest existing stone is part of the Wailing Wall and measures 12 meters long by 3 meters high, and probably weighs hundreds of tons. The stones were so heavy that no mortar or any other binding material was used between them. The walls of the Temple towered over Jerusalem, over 400 feet in one area and inside the four walls was 45 acres of bedrock mountain shaved flat—the size of 24 football fields. During Jesus’ day a quarter of a million people could fit comfortably within these walls.

So we can understand the disciples’ surprise when Jesus predicted that this immense structure would be leveled to the ground. And so they pressed Jesus for details – when would it happen? What would be the signs that it was about to take place? They were afraid; something they thought could never change was perhaps going to be gone soon.

Forty years later the prediction came true in 70 AD the Temple was destroyed by Rome. I suppose the disciples felt about the Temple the way we feel about the White House or the Houses of Congress. Even though the attack on the Pentagon in 2001 jolted our assurance somewhat, deep down inside don’t you assume that somehow those government buildings will always be there? Like the Temple was for the disciples, so these building symbolize for us something of who we are. They are a part of our identity as a people. Something we don’t think about every day perhaps, but we know its there.

There are many things, not necessarily imposing buildings, but other things that we assume are a stable part of our lives. A roof over our heads; food in the refrigerator, a place to sleep. Money in the bank, cash in our wallets, spare change in a dish or piggy bank someplace. Jobs, family, good health, freedom to worship here today without fear of persecution. These are things we take for granted; things that make up the background, the bedrock of our world view.

And yet, 75% of the world’s population does not have enough food or a bed to sleep in. The money in the bank and in our wallets, that we probably don’t think is nearly enough to make us happy, actually makes us among the earth’s wealthiest people. The good health that we take for granted separates us from the million people who will die of illness or starvation or warfare this week. And as we roll over in bed and decide whether or not to get up and come to church, billions of people around the world are not free to worship as they please.

Yes, it is true; we have a lot to be thankful for. Blessings abound all around us, blessings that we often don’t even notice or take for granted, even sometimes assume we’re entitled to. On Wednesday evening we’ll gather to count our blessings and share our good fortune with one another before celebrating Thanksgiving day with family and friends on Thursday. Although we should certainly be thankful for all the things we have, perhaps there is an unspoken assumption that if we were to lose them, we would have no blessings to count, nothing to be thankful for? If we’re not careful, our equating being blessed with having things, can lead us to a wrong conclusion.

Jesus tells the disciples not to worry or be alarmed when they hear of wars and rumors of wars. That’s life; those things happen, he says, as does famine, earthquakes, and uprising of nation against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. In the twinkling of an eye all of the things

we take for granted can be gone; but we need not be afraid, he says, for these things are not signs of death, but signs of new life.

And, the author of Habakkuk says that even though the fig tree does not blossom and there is no fruit on the vine; and even though the olive trees produce no olives, and the fields yield no food, and the flocks are cut off from the fold and the cattle are not in their stalls, “yet I will rejoice in the Lord. . . God, the Lord, is my strength.”

What they both seem to be saying is that our level of thankfulness can’t be dependent on what things or how many things we think we have to have to be happy. In fact, as contradictory as it may seem, the most intense moments of thankfulness may not be found in times of plenty, but in times of difficulty instead. Paul, writing from a prison cell, and probably knowing that he would soon die, wrote to the Philippians, “I give thanks to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

Martin Rinkart wrote the hymn we sang earlier “Now Thank We All our God” in 1663 in the midst of the 30 Years war as he went about conducting as many of 50 funerals a day in the walled city of Eisenberg. Those seeking refuge within the city ate all the available food, and then starvation and disease took its toll. But in the midst of this terror, Rinkart could write, “Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices, who wondrous things hath done, in whom this world rejoices.”

Detrich Bonhoeffer, imprisoned by the Nazis in 1943, was described by a fellow prisoner as “always . . . spreading an atmosphere of happiness and joy over the least incident, and profound gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive. He was one of the very few persons I have ever met for whom God was real and always near.” After preaching to his fellow prisoners for the last time, as he was taken away to be hanged, Bonhoeffer said to one of them, “This is the end; but for me it is the beginning of life.” He trusted what Jesus said – “There will be wars and rumors of wars, but this is the beginning of the birth pangs.”

In our own national history the Pilgrims that first Thanksgiving, were not sharing a Hallmark moment. Half their numbers were dead, they were strangers in a strange land, but still there was thanksgiving to God. Their gratitude was not for something but in something.

And it was in the midst of war when our country was at war with itself, during the Civil War that President Lincoln saw the need, amid the bloodshed, for a day of Thanksgiving.

Fleming Rutledge, 25 years the pastor of Grace Episcopal Church in New York City, writes that “the Bible teaches us that the life of thankfulness is the proper way for human beings to be related to God. . . . The most important thanksgiving of all, the one that transcends all human contingencies, is thanking and praising God for being God.” (“The Thankful Life,” *The Bible and the New York Times*, New York, 1998, p. 21). Giving thanks, she says, “is not just an activity to be taken up at certain times and set aside at other times. It is a whole way of life. It is the foundation of our relation to God whose steadfast love and faithfulness are celebrated in the Bible from beginning to end” (p. 22).

And, a life of thankfulness, we learn from the Bible, is lived in view of the “hard things of existence.” As our lives deepen and mature, we are able to pray not just for the obvious blessings, but we can also give thanks for obstacles overcome, for insights gained, for lessons learned, for increased humility, for help received in time of need, for strength to persevere, for opportunities to serve others (p. 23).

I saw a church sign yesterday afternoon driving along Lexington Road. It said something to the effect that “thanksgiving is thanksgiving.” Thanksgiving, then is not a day of too much food and too much football – thanksgiving is a process, a way of living, a way of developing an posture of gratitude in all things, so that even when failure seems to be the order of the day, even when nothing goes our way, when those things we thought we could never do without are suddenly gone, when the Temple of our lives has been destroyed, whatever that bedrock, unmoveable thing is that we cannot imagine life without, we can still give thanks to God, not for

the awful things, of course, but because in the midst of the awful things, God is God – always has been, always will be – and that is the true bedrock of our existence – not anything else that we may surround ourselves with. So this week, as in the rest of our lives, may we give thanks for nothing--for no thing – not for our wealth, our health, or any other of our possessions, relations, or achievements; may we give thanks instead that “God is, that we are, and that God’s promise and love shall be with us when” all else is gone and when “time itself shall be no more.” (Peter Gomes, “Redeeming the Familiar,” *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, New York, 1998, p. 234).

Amen.