

SERMON
“Ordinary Time”
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St. John’s Chapel UCC

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-9

Mark 13: 1-8

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

When sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ And they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed, this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.”

Here ends the readings from holy scripture!

SERMON

This is the last Sunday in the longest season of the liturgical calendar. This is the last Sunday of the season of Pentecost, also known as Ordinary Time. It is the season when we switch our focus from God, with us in human form, to God's continued redemptive presence in the world through the Holy Spirit—and how that spirit shapes us as the Church. The Season of Pentecost asks us to **consider the social conditions** of our world, and the implication this has for the mission of the church under the guidance of the Spirit.

The other thread running through this season is that of ordinary time—a just another day kind of time. It is not Advent Time when we live in anticipation of “the word made flesh.” It is not Christmas or Easter—those peak moments in life. Nor is it time spent in the grief of Maundy Thursdays or Good Fridays. It's ordinary time, **nothing special** time, just another plain old day waiting to unfold. **It is also where we spend most of our lives.**

My granddaughter told me after her sixth birthday party that she would have to wait a whole year to be that happy again. I reminded her of all the other special days she had to look forward to before she got to her birthday again. She said yes, but none of them would be her special day. ¹Ordinary time often feels like time spent waiting for the next special day to arrive.

Or it can ²feel like time waiting for the next shoe to fall. We, who have lived long enough, know life holds for us extreme opposites. As surely as we laugh, we will cry.

To this reality the poem from Ecclesiastes points. This poem of Koheleth, the author of Ecclesiastes, is an often misunderstood poem. It is often assumed that Koheleth is encouraging or declaring that there is a proper time when one should perform certain actions, or that one should be concerned with the practical prudence of taking advantage of the hour when the sun shines, when Koheleth is simply pointing to the reality of life's cycle, to the rhythm of life, and

to the fact that in that rhythm there are extreme opposites. Life holds both extreme joy and extreme sadness. And no matter what we humans do, we cannot change the reality that as certain as we were born, we will die. We will laugh and dance, and we will weep and mourn. There is nothing **eternal** in life, except God; no matter how hard we try to hold on to it.

One disciple, we know not which one, walking with Jesus as they leave the temple exclaims about the size of the magnificent temple. He's impressed, as he should have been. The temple in Jerusalem was one of the great wonders to behold. Its mere size made it look **eternal**, like it was going to be around forever.¹

Jesus' response makes it clear this is not the case. "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." Once they get Jesus off to themselves, they want to know when. "When will this happen?" In ordinary time we want to know the "when." As if somehow we can shield ourselves from the blows to come.

Jesus' answer does not satisfy the "when" need. Instead, he tells them that there will be false prophets, wars and rumors of wars, nations rising against nation, earthquakes and famines—but not to worry. These are but **birth pangs**. Birth pangs.

William Willimon tells of a mission trip to one of the poorest villages in Honduras. One evening while there, they had gathered with some of the villagers after working all day in the clinic and they built a fire. They sat around the fire in a circle singing. Then someone suggested that they all share their favorite scripture verse.

"From which verse from the Bible do we find comfort or inspiration? What from the Bible keeps us going when our **ordinary time is split open with catastrophe?**", someone asked as they sat 'round the campfire that evening. So they took turns remembering. Someone lifted up the John 3: 16 passage. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son." Another

¹ William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, "Bad News/Good News," p.

mentioned the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. He couldn't quote it scripture and verse, but the words were locked into his heart to draw on when needed. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

I asked our confirmation class this question the other day. "What is your favorite passage of scripture?" They were stumped for a moment or two. They had never thought about having a favorite scripture passage. When I pushed them to just remember stories from the Bible, they discovered they did have passages of which they were rather fond. I explained to them that as confirmands, they were going to be looking for a passage of scripture they wanted to claim as their very own—a passage that would be read at their confirmation, a passage that would take them through this particular time in their lives. Later, they may need to go searching for new passages for the particular time in which they find themselves—but for now, they would look for scripture that would serve them well at this junction in their lives.

What is your favorite passage of scripture? From what verse in the Bible do you find comfort or inspiration? What from the Bible keeps you going when your ordinary time is split open with catastrophe?

A small Honduran woman said through a translator that evening around the campfire, "I love the words, toward the end of Mark's Gospel, where Jesus tells his people that the temple will be destroyed, the stones of the temple will be thrown down, the moon will turn bloody, there will be wars and revolutions, and everything will be burned."

"That's a comfort?", thought Willimon. He thought perhaps something had been lost in translation. Then the nurse sitting next to him whispered, "I talked to that woman today at the clinic. She has had four children. Three of them died before reaching the age of five due to hunger."

Then William Willimon got it. He had always assumed that Jesus' foretelling of the temple destruction was clearly a catastrophe intruding in on our ordinary time. The place where we spend most of our lives. And where I would suggest we prefer living our lives. As much as we like the highs, the peaks of life, we cannot live there long. The intensity of it is too great. And when the other shoe does fall in life's rhythm, we long to move as quickly as possible into the settle down flow of ordinary of life.

This is not a bad thing. We humans need ordinary time in order to remain sane. When I first moved to New York City, someone told me that time and space there would be distorted. It would do a number on me. I could understand the space part of this warning. Heaven knows, way too many are packed on that small block of real estate. But time! How could time be distorted? I soon learned that it has to do with heightened sensory overload. For instance, when you hear a bad sermon, it seems to go on forever. When you hear a good one, it can seem very short. In New York when you walked out your front door, you are entertained none stop—sensory overload. Hence, time seems to go faster than it really is. This is the reason people walk fast in New York. It is not because they are in a hurry. They are just trying to keep up with the pace of time. I use to pray for boredom, for some ordinary time. People were even warned in New York, as I'm sure they are in most large cities, that you needed to get out of the city at least once every three months. We humans need ordinary time, down time, in order to remain sane.

Yet, there is danger in ordinary time. Great danger occurs when we allow ordinary time to lull us to sleep. Or we cannot live in the present because we are too focused on waiting for the next special day to arrive, or too worried about the next shoe that will inevitably fall. Time spent in ordinary time needs to be savored, for it is our **spiritual Lamaze class time** that prepares us for the birth pangs soon to follow.

Does someone here not know what it's like to have your "temple" destroyed, and have it replaced by something much better?

That small woman in Honduras, who had lost three children to hunger, savored today's scripture. It got her through the hard times because to a person, who has been abused, thrown down and left to watch her children die of hunger, destroying the "structures that be" were welcomed birth pangs of hope. It is divine to give birth, even painful birth to a future that God intends for us—to a world where children do not die of hunger, a world where the preciousness of life rhythm can be savored by **all** God's children. Every last one of us. Amen.