

First Presbyterian Church Wausau, WI
Where Hope Is Found – November 15, 2015 – Mark 13:1-8
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Back several months ago, when the stewardship team was putting together the timeline for our stewardship campaign this year, I neglected to look at the lectionary texts for this Sunday. Not the easiest texts to interpret while trying to encourage generous giving to the church. Especially the text from Mark 13 – also known as the Little Apocalypse – the end of the world type story. Yeah. I didn't really think that one through.

Now, we are certainly not wedded to these particular texts. No one is forcing me to follow the lectionary on any given Sunday. I could have chosen other texts that are more conducive to the type of message I had in mind. However, I am not one to back away from a good challenge. And given the recent headline news, they are oddly appropriate.

So let's look at Mark. Jesus and the disciples come streaming out of the temple in Jerusalem during the week of the Passover celebration, and one of the disciples, clearly from a small town in the country, gets all googly-eyed as he takes in the massive buildings around him. He is awed by their size and splendor, and if he had had an iPhone he would have certainly taken a selfie to post on Facebook. He exclaims to Jesus his excitement and awe at such magnificent sights.

But Jesus is not in the best of moods as he is still reeling from his frustration with the corrupt temple system, a system that neglects its obligation to care for those who are vulnerable, and in fact, exploits them. He scoffs at his disciple's naïve awe, and foretells the coming destruction of the temple. Every building destroyed, every stone knocked down.

A little later, when the disciples are alone with Jesus, they ask him to explain what he meant about the destruction of the temple. Then Jesus brings out the apocalyptic language and tells them how bad things will get. Wars, earthquakes, unrest, false prophets, famine. Jesus paints an ugly picture of the upheaval to come.

But if we think about it, this is nothing new. Those things are already occurring. School shootings, terrorist attacks in Paris and Beirut. Bombings in Baghdad. Disease and famine, refugees and human trafficking, domestic abuse and exploitation of children. But again. This is nothing new. Look back in history .The plague, the Crusades, the slaughter of indigenous peoples, slavery, the Holocaust, numerous wars. We are surrounded by destruction. Oh we may be somewhat insulated from it because we have access to resources that most others don't have, but it's still there.

But Jesus says this – “this is but the beginning of the birthpangs.” And then his revelation goes on for several more verses not in our text this morning in describing the destruction. But those words “the beginning of the birthpangs” are important. The birthpangs of what? Of the Kingdom of God finally breaking in. We are in that moment, the disciples were in that moment. That moment began with God's Incarnation in Jesus Christ. A very long moment, to be sure. But it was in that moment, that moment of Incarnation, when God became flesh, that hope became reality. The world has been experiencing these birthpangs for a really long time – longing for the time of the fulfillment of God's Kingdom.

The image of birth is appropriate. Christ brings new life, new creation. The old is gone, the new has begun. The longing for hope has been satisfied. And now we long for the fulfillment of that hope, the hope that has arrived for us in Jesus Christ.

So let's jump to the passage of First Samuel. Hannah was the beloved wife of Elkanah, but she was barren. Hannah was ridiculed by Elkanah's other wife who was quite fertile. In this time, a woman's worth was measured by her ability to have sons. Being barren, Hannah was worthless. There was no life in her. She was dead inside. But Hannah refused to give in to despair. She went to the temple at Shiloh to pray for a son, vowing to give him into the Lord's service. So fervent was she in her prayer that the clueless priest Eli misinterpreted her distress as drunkenness.

The Lord heard her prayer and in time, Hannah did conceive and gave birth to Samuel, the future prophet who would anoint the first two kings of Israel – Saul, and of course, David. Hannah experienced barrenness in her life, and she turned to God. Her faith was in God to bring life from her emptiness. She boldly came before God in faith. Hope was born along with her son. Hannah's story is but one example of God's plan for the redemption of this world. Hope took root in her soul and was realized in the birth of her son.

So in our world where violence, disease and pain are commonplace, we do not give in to despair. We do not let it have the last word. In Jesus Christ our hope was born, and we await its fulfillment when all things will be made new. That's the message of the gospel.

And now you ask, what has that have to do with the stewardship campaign? What does the gospel have to do with me turning in pledge card with a commitment on it? Good question! I'm so glad you asked.

As you probably know, or have heard a time or two, stewardship is the word we use to describe our commitment to the church of our time, talent and treasure. Now when it comes to time and talent, we have no problem with asking people to volunteer to serve. Every week our mission team and our deacons ask for your help – support a local family by bringing in angel tree presents for the kids, donate fruits and vegetables so our pantry can give fresh food to our neighbors, a little later in the service Jim Slayton is going to ask you to give up some of your time to go stand for awhile out in the cold. Our other teams are constantly inviting people to serve on committees, or sing in the choir – and by the way, Susan needs some extra voices for the Christmas cantata – or be nursery workers or doorkeepers. We have no qualms about asking you to share your time and talents. But when it comes to asking for money, not so much.

It's not so bad when we're asking you to support a special denominational offering, or a project like the Friends Dinner, or to support the good work of the deacons. But when it comes to supporting the church budget, no one likes to ask, and everyone looks at me!

Church people don't like to talk about money. United Way, Red Cross, the ASPCA, the democratic or republican national conventions, NPR and public television – they have no problem talking about money and they are constantly asking for it. All the time. Over and over again. And then if you send them some, they ask for more.

But when it comes to the church, everyone seems to get tight-lipped. It's one thing to buy a Christmas present for a local kid or donate to the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance fund, but to ask for money to pay the light or heating bill? To pay for staff salaries? For copy paper and toilet paper? Or to even pay for something you don't

support but someone else does? Carpet? Computers? Candles? Card stock? Coffee? You want me to pay for those things?

Why support the church financially? Because of the gospel.

It is in the church where Christian faith is formed. It is where we come to worship God. It is where we come to learn about what we believe. It is where we come to serve God and neighbor. It is where we come to celebrate our deepest joys and our deepest heartaches.

The church is the place where a choir anthem stirs bittersweet memories and reinforces faith. It is a place where wide-eyed toddlers reach out their tiny fingers to grasp a bit of bread and dip it ever so gently into the cup. It is a place where people are welcome to come and sit quietly in the sanctuary to feel God's presence and then go pick up their bags of food. It is where our children feel safe and our seniors feel cared for. It is a place where hesitant prayers are raised in committee meetings. Where ideas are fleshed out. Where advocacy takes root. Where attitudes and behaviors are changed. Where love is nurtured.

Do we have disagreements? Yes. Do we get frustrated? Yes. Do we get hurt? Yes. Our church isn't a perfect place. It will never be a perfect place. You will never agree or support everything that is said or done here. But it is a place where the hope of Jesus Christ is preached, shared, sung, taught, and lived.

What does the gospel have to do with the stewardship campaign? This is the place where hope is found. In a world that surrounds us with terrorism and climate change, cancer and infertility, abusive relationships and loneliness – the church is where hope is being born in Jesus Christ. That is our message. That is what you support when you support the church. Lights burn out, sinks get clogged, roofs leak, boilers break, coffee runs out, and employees need to get paid. Those aren't the exciting and flashy mission programs we all like to support. But the church, led by Jesus Christ, is the undergirding organization that keeps that hope alive.

Today is commitment Sunday. I am making my pledge. I am increasing my pledge. I challenge you to do the same.