

**Our Beautiful Stone Structures**  
**Mark 13:1-18; II Samuel 7:1-13; Hebrews 10:11-25**

**II Samuel 7:1-13**

<sup>1</sup>Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, <sup>2</sup>the king said to the prophet Nathan, “See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.” <sup>3</sup>Nathan said to the king, “Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you.”

<sup>4</sup>But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: <sup>5</sup>Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? <sup>6</sup>I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. <sup>7</sup>Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?”

<sup>8</sup>Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts:

I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; <sup>9</sup>and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth.

<sup>10</sup>And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, <sup>11</sup>from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies.

Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house.

<sup>12</sup>When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. <sup>13</sup>He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”

### **Mark 13:1-8**

As Jesus came out of the Temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what stones and what buildings!”<sup>i</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

<sup>3</sup>When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the Temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, <sup>4</sup>“Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?”

<sup>5</sup>Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. <sup>6</sup>Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. <sup>7</sup>When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. <sup>8</sup>For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines.

“These are the beginning of birth pangs.”<sup>ii</sup> ■

### The Sermon

Is there anything that reaches out and grabs your memory’s imagination whenever you see it, even if it’s just in an old photograph, or even just in your mind’s eye?

Or when you hear something that takes you back to an indelible time or circumstance; or when you pick up a particular aroma in the air, or when

you taste something that takes you back to a certain table at a certain time?

Like a lot of people in the early 1980s, I had a sizeable record collection—you know, the old 12-inch vinyl phonograph records that were the primary mode of recorded music through most of the 20th century.

There was something about the whole experience: there were the 12-inch square record covers, and sometimes information printed on the dust jacket inside; and you'd pull out the round disc and put it on the turntable and, if you had your favorites, this great sense of expectation.

And when the needle landed in the groove, you'd hear the comforting, familiar crackle, which would then still; and you knew the beauty that was about to come out, but it was like you could hardly wait for it.

I remember seeing, around 1980-something, a couple of executives from Sony on one of the morning shows, introducing, in limited English, the product that after years as a data storage mechanism for corporations, was just about to go global as a home entertainment medium: compact discs or "CD's." I thought, "That's ridiculous; they'll never sell."

Eventually they got to the last question of the interview, and the host asked the executives about the vinyl records from which the music industry was making billions every year from people like me.

And one of them, searching momentarily for the word, kind of brushed his hands through the air and said one word: "Obsolete."

I thought about all the records in my collection and thought, "There is no way that's going to happen."

But once digital music did make its way into the market, sure enough, between CD's and vinyl records, there was just no comparison. The

sound quality was just so much better. The rumble from turntables, the crackles that accumulated in the vinyl records, all of that was gone.

And suddenly, there was such a purity of sound; you could hear instruments in the mix that had been buried under all the extraneous noise. The dynamic range was astonishing; it sounded like the musicians were right there in the room. On a lot of those old, classic recordings, regardless of what genre they were in, the new purity of sound was a revelation.

The recordings were the same, but it was a brand new day for the mode in which those recordings were transmitted—it was newer, and better, and more suitable for the time. A total improvement.

Only, after a while, some brave souls began to confess: even as audiophiles, people who love the purity of sound, they kind of missed the faint crackles. They missed the faint rumble which had a way of blending all the sounds together like a woven blanket.

The word “warmth” started to be used in a nostalgic way. Suddenly the euphoria over the newfound clarity of those recordings was tempered by a creeping sense that there was something missing, replaced by cold metal and soulless technology.

Even in the face of the incontrovertible improvement in the method of playing the recordings, the total improvement in sound quality by any measure, numbers of people began to realize how much they still valued and missed the old way anyway.

The Temple that Jesus and the disciples knew in their time had been there for five centuries: the central place of the lives of God’s people, the high holy place of all that was sacred.

The original Temple had been built by Solomon almost 1000 years before Jesus was born, and was leveled by the Babylonians in 586 BCE.

But after the Babylonian Exile, the People of God had been allowed to come back to Jerusalem and build the Second Temple, which was completed in 515 BCE. That was the one that Jesus and his disciples knew.

In fact, just a generation earlier, Herod had made some additions to the Temple to make it even larger and more imposing.

Jesus had been teaching there, and on his way out, one of the disciples looked up appreciatively at the beauty and the grandeur and the infinite layers of profound and beautiful meaning in that great stone structure, and said to Jesus:

“Look, Teacher, what stones and what buildings!”

I can imagine the awe and the appreciation that that disciple might have been feeling.

For all of their lifetimes, and for centuries before they were born, the Temple had meant something deep and powerful and foundational.

That stone structure was the place that defined the center of what made them one people, one unified nation.

It was the place of pilgrimage that gave shape to their whole lives. *I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord!”*<sup>iii</sup>

It was the one place where guilt and shame could be rectified.

It was the place where you could go to learn the fundamental truths of the universe and how they applied to your everyday life.

It was, for many of them, the presence of God in their midst.

And now, Jesus was saying: this Temple, for all its grandeur, for all its venerability, for all of its majesty and immovability, is, ultimately, not an end in itself.

Like all expressions of our belief and trust in God, it can only, at best, point beyond itself, toward the one who is worshipped there.

He was saying that these mighty stones and imposing buildings are ultimately no more permanent.

They carry a message, but that message is eternal, and even the stones are only temporary.

There will come a time when those structures, and those stones, will no longer be adequate or faithful or relevant.

Which would seem to give us something to think about when it comes to the permanence of the structures we build out of stone, literally or figuratively, as if they were so permanently relevant and faithful and adequate that they were destined to last forever.

My first year in college I was assigned a roommate who during the course of that year became one of my best friends in the world. We knew we were stuck in the dorms together, so we made the most out of it and developed a great friendship.

Neither one of us was very outwardly sentimental, so after a whole seismic school year together, when it was moving-out time and finally time to say goodbye, and we knew it would never be the same again, we parted with a handshake and a promise to keep in touch. But inside I was just sobbing.

Over the next three years, Mike went his way and I went mine, and we almost never saw each other. One time, when we were seniors, we

bumped into each other on campus somewhere, and it was just like what I had known, and I imagine he had known, it would be.

The talk was only small talk; the old inside jokes felt forced. We just didn't have a whole lot in common.

I had built a stone wall around that Freshman year concept of who he was, and who I was, and what our friendship was. But those very-young-adult years are full of change and exploration and finding out who you are, sometimes adopting and discarding personas at a staggering rate. And we both knew that.

And so we parted, again shaking hands, but this time it was the handshake of two guys who barely knew each other at all.

That freshman year friendship is never too far from my mind, and I still have something of a stone wall around it, as if to keep it, if only in my memory, just as it was for that one incandescent year. But like all earthly things, it was ephemeral.

In a world where so many things are ephemeral, fleeting, it's no wonder we build stone structures. Sometimes we want to keep things as they are, and we want that so badly that we end up trying to entomb eternal things, including God and God's Word, in structures that we think are permanent.

The structure of our religious practice: stone buildings; pipe organs; stained glass windows—many of us used to think that if you didn't have those, you didn't have a church.

The structures of how think about each other, how we talk *to* and *about* one another—like Peter, learning that what God has made clean, we must not call profane, including people who, in our older structures, we couldn't have accepted, let alone embraced.

The structure even of our theology.

And Jesus says: “Do you see those great structures? Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

Mark does not record the immediate reaction of the disciple who had stopped to gaze in awe and draw Jesus’ attention to the mighty stones and the looming buildings of the Temple.

A little later, four of the disciples will ask him when this is going to happen, and it’s easy to read the NRSV translation as if he’s saying, “Hold onto your hats, because wars and rumors of wars, and nation against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; and earthquakes and famines and all that—that’s all just the beginning,” as in, it’s gonna get a LOT worse than that; the worst is only just *starting* at that point.

But I am becoming convinced that Mark has Jesus saying: Yeah, when all of that stuff happens it’s going to be terrible, but it’s not that everything is ending in some nightmare hellscape that God has willed.

Just know, when you are going through it, that something beautiful is about to be born.

As we go through life, we will from time to time suffer the loss of some of the things we thought were permanent. Structures will be dismantled; stones will be separated.

When the forms that we are used to,  
     in which we have invested so much of our hearts  
     and our imaginations and our hopes and dreams,  
 When those forms are no longer the best or the most effective  
     or even appropriate carriers of the message  
     with which we have been entrusted,  
 the Spirit brings us new things,  
     and stirs us to make new structures.

Inevitably, at some point, it becomes time to acknowledge that and respond accordingly.

But with that disciple whose jaw was agape at the stones and the buildings of the Temple,

we can at least pause long enough to look back in a moment of savoring and appreciation for the feelings that are conjured up when we regard those breathtaking structures that have meant so much to us.

We had a guy—a phenomenal human being—in one of the churches I used to serve, Clyde Olin. In his late 90s, Clyde was still golfing on weekends and going to the grade school to read to the kids. He was gentlemanly and witty and on the ball and a tremendous human being.

He was kind of like a human time capsule. There were some ancient photographs of him in his collegiate days at Michigan State, in the 1920's version of ROTC: specifically, he was part of the mounted cavalry corps: he came from a time when horses were still considered a major part of our military technology.

As Clyde neared the age of 100, everybody was kind of pulling for him. Around 98, 99, he started to slow down, and it was fairly quickly downhill. Physically, he made it to 100—there was a big party and everything—but when Clyde passed away a couple of months later, we all knew that it was time, and God rest his beautiful soul.

But partly because of the centenary watch we'd been carrying on for several years, I think many of us had subconsciously convinced ourselves that when that day finally came, and it was time to let him ride his cavalry steed over the horizon one last time, the whole world would stop for a day or two and collectively take stock of the monumental century that Clyde had just taken with him.

And in some part of my soul, anyway, it was, weirdly and indefensibly, a little bit offensive that the world did not miss one beat. We held the service; I noted that on the day he was born the Wright Brothers hadn't made it off the ground and TV was some decades off and email wouldn't happen for almost a full century.

But the world itself just kept turning, not even pausing for a moment of reflection.

But there in that church's sanctuary, we needed to stop and think and give thanks for what we had had in Clyde Olin.

And I daresay that even as the Spirit gives us courage to jump into whatever future is in store for the Church that may look very different from its past, it's important to take a moment to appreciate what has been:

the memories we carry within us of people and places and things that stirred our hearts to faithfulness and inspired us to love and to dig into previously untapped pools of kindness and mercy and generosity.

Of course the world and the landscape in which Christianity brings its message is changing. We know the Church has to do some things and be a different thing than it has been in order to speak into current realities.

And we know that sometimes, we ourselves have some stone buildings that need to be torn down if we're going to be useful in what God is doing in the world.

Some of the things I had always thought were fundamental to who I am—certain beliefs about people, certain understandings of the way the world is supposed to work—I think there are times when Jesus looks at the carefully constructed world within each one of us and says, "All of that needs to come down so you can hear me speaking directly to you."

And I say, “But, God, I have already determined what’s good, and correct, and what you want with me and what you want in the world. So like Peter on the mountaintop with Jesus, I’ll build some permanent housing for you, here in my heart, and it will never change, and then you won’t have to change anything in me.”

And God says, as God said to David 3,000 years ago: “Are *you* the one to build *me* a house to live in?”

Instead, says God: “*I’ll* appoint a place for my people, and I’ll make *you* a house.”

Is there anything that reaches out and grabs your memory’s imagination whenever you see it, even if it’s just in an old photograph, or even just in your mind’s eye? Or when you hear something that takes you back to an indelible time or circumstance; or when you pick up a particular aroma in the air, or when you taste something that takes you back to a certain table at a certain time?

We can give thanks for those memories, and for the things that occasionally cause us to tap into them. It means God has reached out to you through your senses and is reminding you that truth and beauty are all around you, and always have been.

And give thanks, too, that God continues to reach out to you, and is asking you to keep reaching out to the world, spreading good news, bearing a living message not confined to walls that you or others built a long time ago, but free to go anywhere and everywhere that the Spirit will send you, always remembering that no matter what may happen, something true and beautiful is about to be born into the world.

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<sup>i</sup> The disciple's quote is my translation. While NRSV has the disciple exclaiming, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings," I see no literal indication of the word "large" in either case. While that's likely the intent, I'm going to let the listeners picture for themselves what's so great or noteworthy about the stones and the buildings.

<sup>ii</sup> My translation of the end of Mark 13:8. Where NRSV continues an interpretive tradition of "These are but the beginnings of the birthpangs," I am not convinced that the statement is meant to emphasize an idea that the worst is just beginning. I would argue that the Greek supports my translation more literally.

<sup>iii</sup> Psalm 122:1