

Last week, Jesus focused the disciples' attention—and our attention—on two coins leaving the hand of a poor widow outside the temple treasury. But this week, immediately after that episode, the disciples are back to focusing—and maybe we are back focusing—on the impressive structures in our world. On how bigger must be better and how prestige increases with size: “Look, teacher! What *large* stones and what *large* buildings!” We can hear the disciples talking among themselves: “Aren't they impressive? Look at the grandeur!”

But like he does with the woman's coins amidst all the crowd's contributions, Jesus points out that they are missing the point. “Not one stone will be left here upon another. All will be thrown down,” he says. The great buildings won't last forever.

This response perplexes the disciples, who then ask Christ, in private, “*When* will this temple get thrown down, and *what* will be the sign?” Jesus answers neither question. Instead, he redirects their focus to God's intentions for them: There will be idols that rise up and demand your worship—but you, don't follow them. There will be wars where nations rise up against nations—but those won't be final. There will be famines and earthquakes and pain like one in labor—but this is only the beginning of the process. This is only the start of the saga, the workings out along the way, to the ultimate purpose that God has in mind for history.

Portents of these birth pangs continue for twenty verses after our reading ends: Jesus speaks of persecutions and trials, of desolating sacrilege and suffering, and then says, “When you see these things taking place, you know that he is near . . .” Christ lists plagues and afflictions and then says, “I am near.” There is no future tense about it—It’s not “You *WILL* know” or “He *WILL* be near,” but “You know. He is near.”

Outside the temple that day, Christ seems to be saying two things at once: 1. I am near with you now, and the end is not far; 2. and when the end is here, don't forget I am near. Near to you now. Near then as well.

The message that God is near is at the heart of our readings today even though their images make God seem far away. Daniel imagines God’s coming as a prince, a protector of the people, rising up with a kind of sleepers-awake resurrection in which the righteous receive brilliant vindication.

This sounds great to Daniel’s people, because the Book of Daniel was written at a time of persecution, revolt, and chaos. Daniel’s dreams were first heard by Jewish people in ancient Palestine who were fleeing from or rising up against the Romans. The image of the prince arising and the dead awakening sounds like a distant hope to us; but imagine hearing these words while hiding for your life in a dark cave: the words that a prince would arise to vindicate the righteous and establish justice . . . the assurance that the wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky . . . These were words of God’s promise of hope and renewal and life to ancient Jews who were hiding fearfully in the dark underground.

The Gospel writer Mark picks up the hope of this strange cosmic imagery. The people who first read the list of birth pangs in Mark's Gospel were living through them: the temple had indeed been torn down and their society lay in shambles. The authorities were handing Christ's followers over to councils, they were being beaten in synagogues, and were indeed hauled before governors and kings because of Jesus. We can be sure that Mark's readers were wondering where God had gone. To them in their "dark caves," Mark's dramatic images contained the promise of hope and renewal and life, providing assurance that God is near.

Born in time of chaos, persecution, and violence, today's texts exist to redirect listeners to God's purposes, to remind us of the promise that God is coming, to strengthen our faith that God is BOTH on the way and already near. Daniel's and Mark's words are cosmic but hopeful, imaging the worst but also reminding people to endure, in the midst of confusion, pointing the faithful to God.

We don't hear these words while sitting in a cave today like some of Daniel's listeners may have. And we don't hear these words under the religious oppression or persecution that Mark's listeners would have experienced. But we do hear these words in a time of anxiety and may see these images from a hiding place. An inner place of fear. Or uncertainty. Or hopelessness. No, we are not sitting in the darkness of a cave, but the families shattered by the shooting in Thousand Oaks, they, metaphorically, are. And many people in California hear these words this morning dwelling in dark places after their

houses and schools and churches have been thrown—burned—down and people around them lost.

And in those dark places, in those hiding places and caves, what sounds apocalyptic rings as hope. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs because **God is in charge of the end**. There shall be a time of anguish, but at that time your people shall be delivered. When you see these things taking place, you know that Christ is near.

Don't let the bad portents obscure this good news: God is ultimately in charge. God has a purpose in mind for history and it involves deliverance from destruction. And Christ is near, working out God's purpose beyond what we can see now. Christ is near, at work beyond what we may feel as the end. Christ is near, closer than any kingdoms or earthquakes or famines or fires.

In such a time as this, when chaos seems to reign and folks fear their safety not only from the corners of dark caves but also on the streets of everyday life, God calls us to live *not* in terms of the large stones of the temple, *not* by questions of when or what will come, but in the knowledge and according to the promise that Christ is near and on the way. For all of time Christ is near and on the way.

And Christ calls us to live according to that ultimate purpose: to live according to the faith that God controls the end and righteousness triumphs over evil. Christ is near in our prayers, our great high priest in the eternal temple, and also our God on the way in response. Christ is near to us at the font,

where in baptism, God comes to us as a God so near to us as fresh bathwater on our skin. And God is here. At the table, where Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. And so we believe that God is both near and on the way.

God is on the way. Out in front of history. Beyond the birth pangs. Coming as the prince. Arriving ahead of us. When you see these things taking place, you know that Christ is near. Near and on the way. And he who has promised is faithful.

Amen.