

High rise buildings and condos are not supposed to crumble to the ground. Oceans are not supposed to leap out of their bounds and flood miles inland. The ground is not supposed to shake and rumble. The sky is not supposed to form a funnel cloud and destroy a town or a farm.

But yet, we have seen or read about such things....

The World Trade Towers collapse, the condo collapse in Florida.

A Tsunami that floods a nation.

Or folks and businesses that have suffered through the power of a tornado.

We know that such things do happen. Those who provide care for the victims report that they all express a profound sense of loss. They not only may have lost loved ones and property, but in a deeper sense they have lost their innocence. They know that something they once believed in, and believed to be true is NOT—that a towering structure or bridge would stand forever, for instance. Or that the ocean would stay within its bounds. They have lost a foundational belief—a sort of pillar upon which they once built their lives.

No doubt most of us, if not all of us—have experienced some sort of life event when that pillar of life seemed to crumble.

In our gospel read today, as the disciples are leaving the temple, they remark about the large stones and the buildings that appear immovable. Jesus startles them with a prediction that even the great stones that form the temple will one day be thrown down. As they sit together on the Mount of Olives gazing at the magnificent temple, the disciples must have found those words of Jesus troubling, if even a little hard to imagine. Maybe Jesus is prompting them to imagine that God abides in the temple of

humanity—not in buildings—especially those built through the exploitation of the weak and poor, as this temple was.

Peter, James, John, and Andrew ask Jesus privately when his prediction will come true. In his usual style, Jesus warns them not to be led astray by others who will come after him, including some who will claim to speak with the authority of Jesus. Jesus tells the disciples not to be worried by wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, or famine—as these are signs of the beginning of the end. Jesus really doesn't answer the question directly. Instead, he sets out for them a way to live that does not focus all of their attention on the destruction of the temple or the second coming.

So here is the challenge for us...with those among us who, invoking the name of Jesus, want to draw ALL of our attention, and focus, and energy on the “end of the age”. There are publications and internet sites that offer formulas for interpreting every tragic event, every hurricane, every war, every famine, every tornado, and every earthquake as part of God's plan for the second coming of Jesus. Some groups have even created their own “end time clock” or “rapture index” to predict when the last days will be.

The words and warnings of Jesus are just as important now than ever. Every generation has heard the voices of those who claim they are privy to the inside info about when Christ is returning. That becomes a problem area when we, like the disciples, can become so focused on discerning the signs of the times that we neglect the more important mission to witness to the gospel.

This talk of end times has a fancy church word connected to it: eschatology. These final judgement texts were always popular

during times of severe persecution and oppression, in both Jewish and Christian circles. They provided hope for those experiencing persecution and reminded the believers that suffering and evil were not totally without meaning.

So how does one survive the devastations that come along to us in life? How does one live in the midst of all these competing voices—voices full of passionate intensity, claiming that these are signs of the end of the age?

Maybe our focus should not be on the very signs themselves. Maybe our focus might be better served to focus on the one who is to come—the one who guides us and enables us to look up after a devastation and claim the certainty of blessing as a beloved child of God. Even when things may seem to have fallen apart. Even when it may appear that anarchy has been loosed on the world. Even then, may we trust that the center will hold.

Lamar Williamson, a biblical scholar, says that every Gospel writer leaves the church with a challenge. He says: “John calls the church to love one another. Matthew and Luke call the church to engage in mission to the Gentiles—to those who are considered “other”. But perhaps the most daunting challenge is the one left for us by Mark: ‘Beware—keep awake, Watch, resist, hold out for the coming of the Son of Man.’ For in that midst we might discover that we have much faithful work to do.”

In the words from our Hebrew reading—*“Let us provoke one another to love and good deeds.”* Or, as one translation puts it, *“sparking love and good deeds.”*

Life in Christian community also calls us to acknowledge the unfinished nature of what God has set in motion. Our transformation, personally and within community, is not yet

complete. The fullness of the kingdom of God has not yet been revealed. We are a people who live in this sort of dance of the already—but—not quite yet! And within that dance there is room for a lot of moves. For we all have that potential to grow, evolve, question, and be transformed. Everything that we do either draws the Kingdom of love closer, or pushes it further off.

I close with a short reflection called "*I've changed*" by Joyce Flight from the book *Images of Women in Transition*.

"For twelve years I drank my coffee black and complained loudly over the necessity of setting out cream and sugar for my husband every meal. Then, while visiting relatives, I decided I preferred my coffee with cream. For weeks back home I struggled with pride, wanting to put cream in my coffee but fearing my husband's reaction. At last one morning I asked for the cream. He looked at me with surprise and asked simply, 'How long have you been using cream?' and passed it to me. Joy! He had let me change. I was no longer trapped by my past behavior.

How hard it is to let other people change and grow! We box them in with our picture of them. We think, 'He wouldn't want to do that. She's never done that before. They aren't interested in that sort of thing.'

Jesus allowed people to change. He expected great things of them. He let them respond as free and authentic individuals. Do we?"