Sunday, November 19, 2000
THE ROMANCE OF RUINS
Mark 13:1-8

The children's stories I remember usually ended with the statement, "And they lived happily ever after." When I was a child, I never questioned the truth of that conclusion. When we are very young and have almost no life experience, we assume everything around us will go on forever just as it is without changing very much. As we grow and mature, we discover that all stories have different endings, that everyone does not live happily ever after, and that life itself is filled with endings and new beginnings — some happy and some tragic. The one thing we can count on in life is change, and much of it is unpredictable.

When I was growing up, my brother and I worked long and hard to build a tree house in a huge elm tree in the field near our home. It was a two-story tree house with a trap door to let you enter the second floor from the first. We thought it was the best tree house ever built and assumed that it would be there forever. When we went away to college and came home for holidays, it was always there. Slowly, however, some of the wood began to rot, and parts of the house fell to the ground. A few years later, not much of it remained. Several years after that, the big elm tree died from "Dutch Elm Disease" and had to be cut down. Both the tree and the tree house were gone.

There is nothing we build that will last forever. The ruins of buildings that once were are all around us. Life never holds still for anyone for very long. Just when we get everything in order, something breaks loose or breaks down. We might have our education completed, the children raised, the house paid for, but life doesn't hold still for very long. Something else will come up — some other challenge, opportunity, or crisis. Someone we love dies suddenly or slowly. There is pain and resentment from a broken relationship, the sense of failure from unfulfilled plans, and the frustration from things never falling into place the way we think they should.

Some of us even thought that by the time we reached a certain age, all the big questions would be answered, all the troublesome problems would be handled, and life would take on a safe routine in which we could coast along with little difficulty and few concerns.

However, when we got to the magical age when all the mysteries would become clear, we were surprised to find that the questions far outnumbered the answers and that every day brought up something that prevented us from coasting along. Life is filled with ruins — physical and mental.

In the time of Jesus and before, the Temple in Jerusalem was the supreme symbol of God's presence, holiness, and power. Surely, it would last forever. Everything else in life might change and decay, but not this omnipotent symbol of God. That's what the disciples were implying when they said to Jesus after leaving the Temple with him: "Look, teacher, what large stones and what large buildings." In other words, "This building is something that will always be here. It is indestructible. It's something we can count on that will never change."

The disciples were shocked and surprised when they heard Jesus say: "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

They were so astonished that a little later, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will this be?" "When that will happen, no one knows," Jesus replied.

And then he added, and I'm paraphrasing, "Your job is to be alert, faithful, and do your work one day at a time."

What's going on in this interchange and the comments that follow in the gospel stories? There are passages in the Bible, and this is one of them, that tell us everything in life as we know it comes to an end. One Biblical commentator put it this way: "The whole great dance of things will stop. Histories will terminate. The lights will go out. The whole show will close down. The door will slam shut. God may open another door after that closing, a door to another room for another dance, but the only dance we know about is heading for an end."

Predictions of when this end will take place come and go. I have a pamphlet in my study with the title, "88 Reasons the World Will End in 1988." In November of 1992, I saw a sign on a major highway that said, "The world is coming to an end on October 28, 1992." Someone should've taken the sign down after that date passed.

As we approached December 31, 1999, there were many predictions of the dire things that were going to happen. Back in 1970, a book by Hal Lindsey, The Late Great Planet Earth, sold over 4,000,000 copies. More recently, books like Left Behind and others in the series by Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye have been concerned with "end times" and are bestsellers.

Predictions by religious leaders, some sincere and some not so sincere, that the end of the world is coming soon or on a specific date are nothing new. Some people in the early church in the first century expected Jesus to return then. In the early 1800s, a man named William Miller had a conversion experience and soon afterward was convinced from his study of the Bible, along with some complex mathematical formulas, that the world would end in 1843 or 1844. Eventually, the specific date of October 22, 1844, was selected. When it didn't happen, a new date was chosen, and so it has been throughout church history. Certainly, there are a number of Bible passages that can be interpreted to mean that one day creation as we know it will come to a sudden end. If you choose this option, then you too can help frightened people "read the signs." There is big money in the "End-Times Game," and what's more, the deeply satisfying prospect of being sure that the people you consider to be not worthy of God's love are eternally punished or destroyed in a hell of fire. We wouldn't mind seeing some of the people we know get what is coming to them. From our point of view, they are only getting what they deserve.

There's another reason why we human beings long for some sort of judgment day. At least then we would know that someone is in charge. There are days when we get tired of the pain, violence, hatred, illness, and inequality. Surely, we think to ourselves, there's a plan — we may not be able to see it, we don't know when it will be implemented, and we're not sure what will happen to even the score — but, by God, justice demands it.

What's puzzling in the New Testament is that Jesus seems to talk about the kingdom in both present and future tenses. Furthermore, if you study the history of the interpretation of these New Testament stories, you will discover that sometimes they were taken as allegory or metaphor and sometimes more literally.

After almost 45 years in the ministry and more than 50 years of intensive Bible study, I believe these teachings of Jesus have a deeper and more profound meaning rather than an actual physical return at one point in history. We'll examine these deeper meanings in a moment. I like what Fred Craddock once said, "Maybe people are obsessed with the second coming

because deep down they were really disappointed in the first one." Sometimes when people ask me, "When will Jesus return?" I reply, "I didn't know he ever left."

Certainly, a study of history shows that when times are bad or uncertain, talk about the end of the world thrives. But when times are good, that kind of talk subsides. And this makes good sense. A friend of mine said, "How quickly one wishes to check out depends a lot on how happily one is checked in."

To be sure, the gospel stories are filled with the expectation of both the imminent return of Jesus and some sort of final judgment. But it didn't happen, and this very fact became the foremost problem of the New Testament. We are still having to deal with that problem today. It raises more questions than answers. Can't we believe that the kingdom both is and is yet to be, without thinking that God will someday slice the film in half, right in the middle of the movie? Is a cataclysmic intervention the only way to redeem the incalculable suffering of the human race? We have to be careful when we talk about what God will do or has done, and why, and when.

A minister colleague of mine who serves a church in Oklahoma City said that when the Murrah Federal Building was bombed by an anti-government zealot, among those killed were 19 children in a daycare center on the first floor. Some of the pastors in that city called them "God's little angels" and further claimed that the Almighty in his infinite wisdom had "called them home." My friend said, "If one of my children had been among those killed, I can assure you that in the presence of such mindless drivel, I would have had to be physically restrained from strangling the preacher."

What, then, are some of the deeper truths that these Bible stories and prophecies about the end of time contain?

First and foremost, the Bible does not tell us a specific date when the world is coming to an end, or if it will happen all at one time or in a particular way, but it does tell us that the world as we know it is always coming to an end. Nothing except God and God's love are permanent. God's judgment takes place every day in every individual's life.

That's part of the importance of ruins. The ruins of magnificent buildings of the past, the ruins of empires that once existed and thought they would continue to exist for thousands of years, are a continual reminder to us that nothing in this world is permanent. Scientists tell us that 99% of all the species that have lived on earth have died away.

We don't like to hear such things. That's why aged buildings are often pulled down, with all ruins removed. Some aging people desperately try to act and look young because novelty, youth, and beauty are equated in our minds with what is desirable. We are bothered by the realization that life is a way of dying slowly. So, by ignoring or evading ruins, we try to hide the truth. In the deepest sense, the aim of restoring something to all of its former glory is futile.

Now let's talk about the romance in ruins. They remind us that everything comes to an end. Not many would visit the ruins of the ancient buildings in Greece or Rome if they had been restored. The Leaning Tower of Pisa is only interesting because it is leaning. If it were straightened as it was originally built, few would visit. In the summer of 1994, when our church choir sang in the Coventry Cathedral in England, we saw the original cathedral in ruins because of the bombing in World War II. A decision was made not to remove the ruins and rebuild the cathedral as it was originally. The ruins remain, and next to them, a stunning new

cathedral has been built. The ruins remind everyone who visits of what war can do, and the new structure is a witness to the hope for peace and resurrection. Engraved on the floor near the entrance are these words: “To the Glory of God, this cathedral burnt.” And just outside, carved on the old burnt-out walls, is a promise: “The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former.”

We human beings are paradoxical because, in some ways, we prefer the old and what is falling apart. Take young people and the jeans they wear. A new pair of jeans is supposed to look like an old pair. So young people buy pre-faded jeans and jeans that have been worn down with pumice stones or other kinds of treatment. It’s often the case that jeans with holes and ragged cuffs are preferred. Look at the growing market in antiques of all kinds.

Lest we misunderstand, Jesus is not saying that because all things go away, we should not plan and dream and work for the betterment of the world. Nor is he saying that we should neglect the proper maintenance of buildings and automobiles and every kind of property, including our physical bodies. But he is reminding us that we are not to put our ultimate faith in the permanence of such things. Even though the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, God’s loving energy is still at work in the world and in us. In fact, the never-ending loving power of God is always creating new beginnings out of what we only see as endings. That’s the good news!

This means that we are not to be primarily concerned with dates and timetables and predictions and with judgments as to whom is included in God’s reign. Rather, we are to be concerned that we are cooperating with God on the side of the good and living each day to its fullest. Then God’s timetables take over.

The second deeper truth that Jesus was teaching his disciples and us with his comments about the destruction of the Temple is that he was reminding them and us that every humanly designed and constructed temple or institution eventually goes out of existence, and that’s especially true of those that attempt to enclose the “Holy One.” St. Paul wrote, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels.” He was reminding us that too often we confuse the vessel with the treasure.

Name any temple or vessel you can — any ground that is sacred because, at one time or another, God met us there: a church, a denomination, family, vocation, neighborhood, memory, or dream; they all have a lifespan, and they all come to an end. But that does not mean that God’s Spirit or the power of God’s love has deserted us.

Here’s what I believe. I believe that no matter how many of our little worlds come to an end, no matter how many of our temples tumble around us, the love of God, as expressed in Jesus, continues to enter our world in new ways each day. I also believe that God continues to bring good out of what we see as evil, and that when all is said and done, the goodness and love of God will triumph. Of course, if you are like me, I sometimes find myself nervous and anxious in the meantime, even though I know it’s going to come out all right. It’s something like what the President of Notre Dame University said as he was listening to a delayed broadcast of the school’s football game with the University of Southern California and he knew in advance that his university had won. “Why am I so nervous?” he wondered out loud. “I know how this comes out.” Amen.