

GIFTS OF LOVE: Wombs, not Tombs

Mark 13:1-8

November 17, 2024

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/gifts-of-love-wombs-not-tombs/

I.

In the far-west region of Ukraine lies the historic city of Lviv. Its cobblestone streets, red-tiled rooftops, and centuries-old architecture echo the resilience of its people and the many empires and cultures that have called it home. Here, the streets are narrow and winding, lined with cafes where the scent of fresh coffee mingles with the sweetness of honey cake. At the heart of the city is Rynok Square, a colorful gathering place where laughter and conversation bounce off the old stones as if they, too, are alive.

Just a mile from this vibrant square, a once-abandoned building now stands as a beacon of hope—a refuge for the weary and home to the Disciples Church.

II.

Our church's partnership with this faithful community started in 2013 in Eastern Ukraine. Shortly after our work together began, the conflict with Russia ignited. As the violence escalated, their church was set ablaze, and leaders received death threats, forcing some to relocate to the western city of Lviv. There, they planted a new church, faithful to share the Good News despite the uncertainties around them.

In September 2018, a team from our congregation traveled to Lviv. Before our visit, Disciples Church had acquired the abandoned building near Rynok Square. This century-old building had once been a hospital and shelter for the poor. We listened as Pastor Yelisey shared his vision for the church: programs to support those struggling with addiction and discipleship initiatives to nurture faith across generations.

But on that September day, as we gathered for a prayer on the back steps, neither Yelisey nor our team could have foreseen what this building would become. We never imagined that in three short years, it would hold beds and shower facilities for over a hundred refugees. We didn't know that below our feet, a bomb shelter would be constructed to withstand missile and drone attacks. We didn't realize that the great room would host trauma care for Ukrainian children who know only global pandemics and war. Since Russia's full-scale invasion began in February 2022, the impact has been devastating — cities reduced to rubble, millions displaced, and civilian lives heartbreakingly cut short.

The people of Ukraine know what it means to watch the unthinkable crumble around them. Centuries-old buildings and monuments, once symbols of endurance, lie in ruins. But the loss goes much deeper than shattered structures. They have lost loved ones to the war, fathers and sons sent to the front lines, and cities and families devastated and divided by war. They've lost the peace we take for granted of walking down a familiar street or putting children to bed

without fear of daily missile strikes. They've lost livelihoods, liberties, and limbs, and as the war approaches a third year, many have lost hope for a future that is yet another casualty. They've lost things they never imagined losing.

II.

When Mark's Gospel was written, another faith community lost things they, too, had never imagined losing. Around 70 CE, there was a Jewish uprising against Roman rule. Known as the First Jewish Revolt, this rebellion stemmed from long-simmering political, economic, and religious tensions. The revolt ended in thousands and thousands of Jews being killed, enslaved, or forced into exile throughout the vast Roman Empire. Jerusalem was ravaged, and the Second Temple was plundered and ultimately destroyed. For first-century Jews, it must have felt like the end of the world.

The temple was everything to ancient Israel. It was the house where God dwelt. It represented God's presence in and among the people of Israel. Yes, they were oppressed by Rome, suffered greatly, and yearned for freedom. Still, when things became too much, they need only lift their eyes to this magnificent wonder of the ancient world, the white marble and gold temple glistening in the sun, and they would be reminded God was with them.

But the unimaginable happened. The temple was in ruins. Had God left them as well?

Amid all that loss, Mark's Gospel is born, reminding first-century believers of something Jesus said outside that very temple nearly 40 years earlier.

Jesus and the disciples had left the Second Temple with its tables, agendas, and pious but prideful offerings upended by Jesus. As they walked away, one of the disciples marveled aloud at the magnificence of the temple's structure. Unimpressed, Jesus replies, "Do you see these great buildings?" Jesus says. "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." (v. 2).

The disciples were astonished, unable to imagine such a thing, and asked him the same questions we often do, "When will this be? What will be the sign that this is about to take place?"

Jesus doesn't offer a timeline. Instead, he shifts their focus: Do not be alarmed, Jesus says. "Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, **but the end is still to come**. For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." (vv.6-8)

Do you know what we often say in the US about wars, fighting, and famine? It's the end of the world! It's a sign of the end times! Do you know what they say about wars, fighting, and famine in places like Sudan? It's just another Monday.

That may sound crass, but my intent is not insensitivity but sensitivity. I want us to be aware of how ethnocentric it is to hear of wars and disasters and proclaim the end is near when wars, famine, and natural disasters are and have been a lived reality for others for generations. Jesus says in Mark 13 **these things are not the end**. They are the expected struggles and pains of something yet to be born. So, don't be alarmed, Jesus says. Don't be led astray. And don't be consumed with when, where, and how.

Pastor Nadia Bolz Weber described the type of apocalyptic literature we find in Mark 13 like this: "Originally... apocalyptic literature — the kind that was popular around the time of Jesus — existed not to scare the bejeezus out of children so they would be good boys and girls, but to proclaim a big, hope-filled idea: that dominant powers are not ultimate powers. Empires fall. Tyrants fade. Systems die. God is still around."ⁱ

III.

Ukrainians, and many throughout history, have seen cities that once seemed solid reduced to rubble, watched as everything they thought would remain forever is suddenly gone. The destruction is real. ***And yet, so is the persistence of hope.***

Maybe this is a word of hope for you today, too, as you sit amid the rubble of things you thought were indestructible. Like the disciples, we have our temples—the things we believe are unshakable: our relationships and marriages, our accomplishments and bank accounts, our health, our systems and institutions, our beliefs. When those crumble, it's terrifying. But Jesus reminds us: "Do not be alarmed."

Less than a week after this conversation with the disciples outside the temple, Jesus would transform a tomb into a womb. And when the resurrected Christ first appeared to the disciples again, his first words were the same, "Do not be alarmed." What you thought was an end is a beginning. The tomb you thought held death's victory became a womb of resurrection hope.

Two Sundays ago, on All Saints' Day, as we remembered those who have gone before us in Christ, we reflected on God's promise to make all things new. Today's Gospel continues that theme. It's another reminder that what looks like an unraveling is often the first step toward renewal. And let's be honest—doesn't that feel like the exact message we need in these times? When so much seems to be falling apart, Jesus invites us to look deeper. Beneath the chaos, he says, there's good news.

There's a story about a young boy who saw a giant pile of manure in his yard on his birthday. Most kids might despair at the sight, but he grabbed a shovel and started digging, joy in his eyes. "What are you doing?" a friend asked. "I know there's got to be a pony in here somewhere!" he replied. Sometimes faith looks like that—digging through the mess, trusting that there's a promise of life, even if we can't see it yet.

IV.

From the ashes of the Second Temple's destruction rose communities of faith that carried the Gospel as exiles scattered among the Roman empire. From the ashes of Russian missiles, the believers in Ukraine refuse to let devastation have the last word. They are midwives of God's kingdom, birthing hope, love, and peace amid violence, reminding us that even when life crumbles, God is at work, and the story isn't over.

But we forget this truth when life turns upside down—when what feels secure falls apart. We shake off this story of hope, believing it only to be a story or an optional add-on to our lives instead of it being our life. Fear grows louder, and hope fades, and we start to think that other things or people will save us. Or worse yet, we believe that we're unsavable, unlovable. We forget the ending all the time.

There will always be rumors of war. There will be earthquakes, tornadoes, and elections. So, we turn to simple things like gathering bodies together in a building like this to sing praises and to remember promises. We ask for mercy and practice loving. That's why we're all here today. Because when walls are crumbling, we tend to forget the ending. We gather to help one another remember the ending that God is still around, and there is life under the rubble and manure.

If we're willing to pick up our shovels to dig into the work of God's kingdom, we'll find that life. We'll find it in the hearts of people who refuse to give up hope, who rebuild, love fiercely, and refuse to let the world's brokenness define the story. We can busy ourselves with rumors of wars, or we can feed the hungry when the famines come and rebuild homes when the earthquakes. We can fight for justice and build beautiful lives of devotion to the ways of Jesus. We can become midwives of the kingdom who labor alongside God, willing to push through the pain to birth hope, love, and peace into a world desperate for it.

We all have our temples—things we build up, cling to, and trust for security. And yet, Jesus reminds us that even the most substantial structures will fall. But the falling isn't the end. It's a beginning. Like the disciples in Mark's Gospel, we're called to keep our eyes on the kingdom of God, not the kingdoms of this world.

When life feels uncertain, remember the story of Lviv. Remember a building and a people transformed into midwives. Remember a people choosing to see beyond the rubble, trusting God to bring beauty from ashes. Their faith invites us to do the same.

Like Disciples Church, we are in the heart of our city. We may not face the bombs of war, but we are called to build hope amid the rubble of despair, serve as sanctuaries for the weary and exiled, and proclaim that the end is never the end. and as we labor together, let our lives echo the faith of those in Lviv who refuse to give up hope and remind us that the kingdom of God is unshakable. Let us be midwives of the kingdom alongside God, willing to push through the pain to birth hope, love, and peace into a world desperate for it.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ "We're in the Midst of the Apocalypse. And That's a Good Thing." Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber, 2018
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2018/03/14/were-in-the-midst-of-an-apocalypse-and-thats-a-good-thing/?noredirect=on>