



Christ United Methodist Church

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Sermon: When It Gets Worse Before It Gets Better

Text: Mark 13:1-8

Speaker: Pastor Don Archer

Good morning. My name is Don Archer and the title of this morning's sermon is: **Things will get worse before they get better.**

An appropriate title as we anticipate gathering with our families for the holidays. An appropriate title as we reflect on a conversation that Jesus had with four of his disciples. The conversation takes place on the Mount of Olives. The writer of Mark's gospel is very specific about the location: "...the Mount of Olives **opposite the temple.**" Almost impossible to miss the emphasis and the implication: **opposite the temple.** I believe this is far more than a geographic reference. Opposite the temple. Jesus was opposite the temple in many ways. Condemning the commercialization of a holy place and turning over the tables and cash registers of the money changers. Opposite the temple as he pointed out that the copper coins given by a widow were more than the abundant contributions of the wealthy. Opposite the temple as he dares suggest that its days are numbered. *Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.*

The four disciples, Peter, James, John and Andrew are undoubtedly shocked to hear this prediction. *Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to happen?* In his response to his worried followers, Jesus outlines a rather grim scenario. *Many (false prophets) will come and lead many astray. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars ... but that's not the sign ... there's still more stuff to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in all sorts of places; there will be famines. This is just the beginning.* **Things will get worse before they get better.** It's like that first labor pain. You think: *Wow, this really hurts and then it gets progressively worse and then you have a child and things really get worse.* I know a lot about birthin' babies and such. I speak from personal experience.

Notice that Jesus never actually tells his disciples when the temple will be destroyed. He simply says that a lot of bad stuff has to happen first and just when you think it can't get any worse ... it will. Sound familiar?

I am reminded of that scene from one of my favorite Christmas movies: *Caddy Shack*, where Bill Murray's character is caddying for a Lutheran Bishop and it starts pouring down the rain. Monsoonal type rain. The Bishop is having a good round and doesn't want to stop playing. He turns to his caddy to seek advice. Realizing that the Bishop doesn't want to hear the truth, he responds: *I'd keep playing. I don't think the heavy stuff's gonna come down for quite awhile.* Re-enforcing the denial.

I watch the terrible fires in California and wonder to myself: *How can there be anything left of that state. It seems as if there is a wildfire burning out of control every week.* I watch the reports of a shooting at a synagogue in Pittsburgh and a shooting at a bar in Thousand Oaks and I feel guilty about not being shocked or saddened or surprised. It has become so commonplace. I hear the hate speech being spewed by men and women who are supposed to be our leaders and I wonder what message is being sent to our children. In the context of all of this I read today's gospel and hear Jesus saying: **Things will get worse before they get better. This is just the beginning.** I am discouraged. I look for hope and for inspiration. I turn to the church ... no, even as we sit here in this sanctuary, the church, The UM Church in particular and The Church, in general, is crumbling. The time will come when what was once believed to be solid, unshakable, reliable ... will become divided, unrecognizable, led astray. There are voices that try to put a positive spin on all of it: *'Let's keep playing. I don't think the heavy stuff's gonna come down for quite awhile.*

Have I managed to cheer anyone up? There are times when the words of scripture, when the words of Jesus, do not leave us *merry and bright.* They leave us with a taste of reality in our mouth. They cause us to deal with, confront, what we would rather deny.

I wonder what Peter, James, John, and Andrew were thinking as Jesus unfolded this tale of pending doom? What was the look on their faces? Shock? Sadness? Disbelief? If we listen closely, there is some word of comfort ... maybe even hope. *When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, when you see all this awful stuff, and hear these terrible things ...do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come.* I think that is a positive statement. But I have failed. **I am alarmed.** I am afraid on many levels about many things that are happening right before our eyes.

So, what do we do? While the world around us is falling apart, where do we turn? Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Away from the temple. A place where the temple could be seen and, perhaps, put into some perspective. In Ritchie County, WV there is a little town called Auburn. At one end of that town there is a United Methodist Church. (One of the first churches that I attempted to serve as college student.) There were times when I felt overwhelmed by what I was doing or what I thought needed to be done. One fall day I took a walk and ascended a hill outside of town. As I began to look around, I could see the Auburn Church. From that vantage point it did not look so daunting or intimidating. It looked peaceful and serene and inviting. It helped, somehow, to see it from a safe distance. When things became particularly stressful, I would make that walk to put things into perspective. It was a temporary reprieve, but an effective one.

The temple that Jesus, Peter, James, John and Andrew were seeing from the Mount of Olives, was so central to their faith. The temple was more than a building. It was where God lived. God's dwelling place on Earth. How could it be destroyed? Impossible! But, in 70AD the temple was destroyed by the Roman Army. Not one stone was left upon another. The dwelling place of God was reduced to rubble and ruin. Along with it, the faith and hope of many people. How could God be worshiped? Where could God be worshiped? The destruction of the Temple led to revisions and changes in Jewish thought and religious practice. Believers were forced to ask: *What is central to my life, to my understanding of, and service to, God?* If the temple is gone, what is left? They began to read and to hear the scriptures in a new light.

So it was for the followers of Jesus after his death on a cross outside of Jerusalem. They were forced to ask: *What is central to my life, to my understanding of, and service to, God?* They also began to read and to hear the scriptures in a new light. The light of a new reality. They began to believe that Jesus was present with them through their shared experiences of him and his words to them. They began to believe that the Holy Spirit of God, working in them and through them, was no match for wars or rumors thereof. The reality of nations rising up against nations or kingdoms against kingdoms did not dismay them. Because their king and their kingdom was not of this world. Earthquakes and famine came to their world and their time but they faced them with a faith that shook the world. Tyrants threatened, armies marched and destroyed, the good were slaughtered while the greedy and godless prospered. And yet ... and yet, without benefit of the temple, or even the synagogue, with nothing more than small gatherings of men and women, praying and breaking bread together in the name of Jesus ... lives were transformed. Sins were forgiven. The poor were loved and cared for. The last and the least were welcomed and included. God was doing something new.

On so many horizons, things look very bleak. **Things will get worse before they get better.**

Fortunately, the life of faith and the practice of grace is not dependent upon our circumstances. In all of this there are still moments when I am able to risk allowing myself the gift of hope and the extravagance of joy. I find strength in you and our shared experience of Jesus. I find reassurance in the gift of holy scripture from the fifth chapter of Paul's letter to the church at Rome: *Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*

I also take comfort in the words of George and Ira Gershwin:

*Together we're going a long, long way
In time the Rockies may crumble,
Gibraltar may tumble
They're only made of clay
but our love (God's love) is here to stay.*

I know things sound bad and look bad and are bad. Do not be alarmed. God is about to do a new thing.

Amen.