

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
November 15, 2015
Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell
Text – Mark 13: 1-8

Midweek, I expected that today's sermon would include some snarky remarks about the Red Cup Controversy. But, then, on Friday, Paris happened. And as the days went on and the news reports and commentary began to multiply – in some cases, going viral – we also learned of suicide bombings in Beirut and Baghdad that received less media coverage.

Do you know about the Red Cup Controversy? It seems that Starbucks coffee has been targeted this year as the first gauntlet thrown down in the “war against Christmas.” You see, its holiday cup for 2015 is just plain red. It has no “Christmas symbols” as in past years. No “Christian symbols” like snow flakes, snow men, and pine trees. So, according to some (who knows who – right wing Christians or just someone throwing this out on the internet to provoke). Whichever, it has succeeded, drawing so many responses that people are saying, “enough already. Move on.” Or posting alternatives, like “If you really want to keep Christ in Christmas, feed the hungry, clothe the naked...”

And then, Paris happened.

I have a theory. I am wondering if so many, many people get caught up in some of this Facebook silliness (or with radio and television talk shows) as a distraction. Because the things that are going on in the world around them are so frightening. So pervasive. With, seemingly, no solution. This week it is Paris, Beirut, and Baghdad. Earlier this year, it was Kenya, Afghanistan, Iran – planned and mostly targeted attacks by terrorists. Or mass shootings and random drive-bys here in our own country, town, or even block. Prayers, lament, outrage, analysis. All of these rise to our attention – and will fall in a week or so, or whenever the next outrageous act occurs. And, it will. We know that by now.

It is no wonder, I suppose, that some take this state of affairs as fulfilling Jesus' words in today's Gospel, “that nation will rise against nation, there will be earthquakes and famines...” And the Temple will fall down.

I wonder if the disciples would have liked a similar distraction when Jesus told them that every stone of the Temple would be thrown down. We know they never did pay much attention to his repeated warnings of what he was about to endure. The Temple in Jerusalem was an amazing architectural wonder, built of stones that were so heavy that their weight alone provided the stability that held the building together without mortar. When Herod expanded and refurbished the Temple, he used so much gold on the stone walls, that in the sunlight, people approaching were almost blinded by the dazzle.

It was not the first temple, of course. That one, built by King David's son, Solomon, was destroyed and looted by the Babylonians in the sixth century. It was rebuilt in the fifth century, though without the Ark of the Covenant present in the Holy of Holies as that had disappeared. This one lasted for 400 years, during most of which Israel was occupied by

Persians, Greeks, and then, Romans. In 66 CE, the Jewish people staged a revolt against the Romans – and won. For a short while. But they were vastly outnumbered. And they were divided from within by several sects with very different goals. Slowly, the Romans advanced and broke through outer walls and then the various inner walls. Ultimately, a soldier set a fire that grew in such intensity that the entire enormous ROCK structure burned and crumbled to the ground – less than forty years after Jesus’ prediction of its destruction.

Throughout the Gospel story, we see Jesus as vocally critical of the Temple – or the institution that it had become. By then, the high priests were appointed by the Roman occupiers; this had become a political post. Others in the Jewish community were on the Roman payroll – we recall how hated the tax collectors were, for example. One writer (Linda McMillan, “Speaking to the Soul,” *Episcopal Café*, November 15, 2015) says that the spirit of God was no longer among the people in this Temple and that it no longer sustained their spiritual health.

In last week’s Gospel we saw some of Jesus’ critique – the self-important scribes who walked around in their long robes seeking recognition, and praying long prayers to show their piety. And the poor widow, apparently not cared for as the Jewish Law required. In fact, probably exploited by the Temple system.

Yes, I’m sure the disciples did not really want to hear what Jesus had to say. This would be a catastrophe beyond imagining! This Temple was the center of religious life – where people regularly made pilgrimages to Jerusalem to celebrate the holy festivals. It was “too big to fail.” Jesus’ words must have sounded a lot like the end of the world. So, they asked Jesus for signs – for a timetable. And he responded with “the end is still to come. ⁸For 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 birthpangs.”

An interesting metaphor, “birthpangs.” Birthpangs, labor pains, do not lead so much to an end as they do a beginning. New life. A joy so intense as to blot out the pain and discomfort. So, what is Jesus telling us – do we need to be afraid and prepare for the apocalypse? Or do we need to find ways to usher in a new day that brings us closer to the Realm of God?

How? Probably not by Facebook distractions. Yes, of course, we pray, we declare our solidarity with victims of violence, for our world, and, yes, even pray for our enemies. There is more. We are the church. We are baptized members of the Jesus Movement. Bp. Whalon, [Bishop in charge](#) of the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe, reminds us that Jesus would not demonize the attackers and that our baptismal promises call us to “strive for justice and peace among all people.” Perhaps it is time for us to seek out conversations and relationships with those whose faith, ethnicity, and lives are not like ours. Maybe its time to go past the news reports and get personal. All the military or diplomatic tactics or protective policies in the world will not solve our problems of the intense hatred and fear that exists today.

There is only one thing that will. That, my friends, is love. Only love can overcome hatred, evil, and even death. And that love seems to be in short supply. Human institutions and relationships may fail us. Bad things may happen to us. But in the midst of suffering and

upheaval, we can be assured of God's promises. We can do more than wring our hands. We can be about birthing that new realm, rebuilding with stones of love and caring. As my writer says, "whatever you put your love and your energy into, you should remember that it is the work of learning to care for one another, to dream together, to sacrifice for the greater good that make it worth doing. If it's not about the love, it's just a pile of rocks."

Amen.