

“All Will Be Thrown Down”
Mark 13:1-8, Jeremiah 1:4-10
Andrew Foster Connors
26th Sunday After Pentecost
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I read this text on Sunday afternoon right after I walked through the nearly renovated fellowship building next door. “All will be thrown down.” It echoed through my head as I walked up the stairs to my study and looked at all the photographs of the pastors hanging on the wall outside my office. How many of us could name more than one or two? “All will be thrown down.” It rumbled through my mind as your session worked diligently through a long meeting this week going over budgets and plans and discussions about our future – trying to be good stewards of our gifts – trying to build something that can last. “All will be thrown down.” And it whispered to me as I knelt before the casket of a friend’s mother, remembering the parts of her story that I knew, the day before they put her in the ground. “All will be thrown down.”

Some days I wish it were not so. Breathing in the crisp, bright air Friday morning just after the early snow and sleet, I could not shake the melancholy of knowing there will be a time when I am not. Observing the long hours that so many of us invest here to strengthen foundations of a moral community that lifts up values of love and peace and justice countering this age of bullying, belittling, othering, I cannot fully shake the bitter sense of unfairness that the truth of our own temporality brings. Perhaps this is why we construct ornamented buildings like this one designed to look hundreds of years older than it is. To deceive us for a moment, or a day, if we’re lucky, from the gravitational drag on our bones, drawing us back to the cradle of our evolutionary birth. “All will be thrown down.”

But other days, I relish in this good news. In this present moment filled with hatred toward Jews, and Muslims, and immigrants; undergirded by a white resentment that goes unexamined – all this be thrown down. The white nationalism fueled today by some in the Republican Party, but once festering largely in the Democratic Party, betraying racism’s preference for power over partisanship, this will all be thrown down. Inequality that breeds injustice, a criminal justice system that has gone horribly awry, and some of our families girding up our loins for the inevitable fights planned for some of us, *planned by* some of us over the Thanksgiving table. “All will be thrown down.” Whether that is bad news or good depends a lot on where you stand.

This text came to its final form during the Roman War that took place in the years 66-70 CE. There was an insurrection by Jews intent on restoring the Davidic Kingdom. This will be the war, its leaders promised, that will make Jerusalem great again. We can go back to the glory, back to the way that we imagined that it was once upon a time. And while I’d like to think that we can all see the limitations of that approach – make the world great again - truthfully it’s the place where many of us retreat to when we’re feeling scared, or angry, or hurt – go back to the safety, go back to the normalcy, go back to the way that it was. Return to civility. Return to

normalcy. Return to bipartisanship. Return to an honest wage for an honest day's work. Return. Return. Return.

Jesus says, nope, "All will be thrown down." There is a great dismantling that God is undertaking in the world and in your life which is sometimes terrifying, sometimes exhilarating. Sometimes grief inducing, sometimes joy-filled. It all depends on where you stand. Will Willimon tells the story of a mission trip to an impoverished village in Honduras. Guests and hosts were sharing, one evening, their favorite Bible passages. One of the North Americans shared John 3:16, "for God so loved the world." Another member of the traveling group shared Psalm 23 – the Lord is my shepherd. . .He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. A Honduran host shared Mark 13 - Why is *that* your favorite passage a member of the visiting group asked? Because everything that keeps us poor isn't going to last, their host replied. It will all come tumbling down.¹

And when the world comes unglued, Jesus says, the most important thing, is that you not be led astray. People who come in my name, Jesus says, will lead you astray. Standing way up here in this little box, I get the irony. The church puts people like me up here and says, "tell us about God." And Jesus says, "Fine. Let him preach. Just don't take him too seriously. His head is going to be hanging on the wall on the second floor of the church house one day, don't let him lead you astray." It's why the Protestant reformation worked hard to wrest power from the hands of clergy. Let them preach to us, but take away the car keys for everything else. It's a long way to fall from up here.

Religious people who lead you astray, Jesus tells us, basically come in two kinds of packages. There are the people who claim they have more authority than they do. In this moment I count among them the extreme right evangelical pastors who sold their soul to get cozy with presidential power and also the Catholic hierarchy in its inability to police itself. Beware of the religious folks who come in my name but claim they have more power than they have.

But beware, too, of the one who tells you that this dismantling is not required. The people who say that this faith business is only about building and planting and not about plucking up and tearing down. A few years ago some folk left our church because they didn't appreciate the number of times we named white supremacy as an evil that must be rooted out of our hearts and our society. They were earnest in their belief that what attracted them here was our talk of inclusion, of love for all people, of a welcome that means everybody. I wish I had done a better job of showing them that Jesus says you can't get to that kind of community without a dismantling. You can't get that place without being undone, remade. You can't get to the place only by standing up high in pulpits or promenades designed for your comfort.

All will be thrown down. The good news is that the dismantling signals a beginning – birth pangs. There are signs of it all around. I heard it on the radio last week when author and comedian Lane Moore explained to Scott Simon how she survived the night when she had decided to give up on life. The family she grew up

¹ William H. Willimon, "This Temple Is Coming Down!," Sermon for Every Sunday, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1Zq7Pzvt8Q>

in was an abusive one. She was done with life and just happened to drive by a church that just happened to be open on a weeknight and these ladies who were praying there, prayed for her and took her in – gave her love to give her a better chance of living through her own trauma – she discovered something good – a new beginning - on the other side of her devastation. Or the conversation I overheard with a pastor the other day, painfully shy, who’s had a difficult time getting started. “Why are doing this if it’s so painful?” she was asked. “Because when I walk into church I see the people that are used to never been seen. That’s why God called me into this because I know when I figure this out I’m going to create a community where people like me who are longing to be seen are finally heard and known.” Or in a conversation with Fern Cloud last Sunday evening over dinner. Fern used to hate the church. “I was a persecutor of the church,” she told me. “The church destroyed my culture, my people, our land, our health, our identity.” I hated everything about the church.” And then one night, broken and dismantled in her own life she walked into a friend’s house where her friend’s church just happened to be worshiping and she was overcome by the Holy Spirit. Now she’s leading the Presbyterian Church in dismantling everything about our church that led the Christian faith into destructive racism.

I’ve learned through the years that this is the way God seems to work. Tearing down what’s not giving us life, breaking down the systems that bind us, rooting out the things that keep us apart from God and each other; and doing it on a timeline we cannot discern, with people we’d never have chosen because they didn’t fit our expectations of who’s religious, or godly, or good, or enough. We get the assurance that God is at work but no details. Everything else is on terms of God’s own choosing. The hard part, for a people who like to be in control, is to see our future uncertainty as good news, not because we like uncertainty, but because we trust God with our future.

A few months ago, Michelle Alexander wrote in the NY Times that those of us who believe in freedom, equality and justice, compassion and justice need to stop describing ourselves at the resistance. “There is a reason,” she wrote, that “marchers in the black freedom struggle sang ‘We Shall Overcome’ rather than chanting ‘We Shall Resist.’ Their goal was to overcome a racial caste system — to end it — and to create a new nation, a Beloved Community. Similarly, those who opposed slavery didn’t view themselves as resisters; they were abolitionists.” Picking up on Vincent Harding’s work, she described our history as a river “sometimes powerful, tumultuous, and roiling with life; at other times meandering and turgid, covered with the ice and snow of seemingly endless winters, all too often streaked and running with blood.” That revolutionary river, she wrote, is the thing that brought us thus far. It is the only thing that can take us to where we all belong.²

A little while ago we baptized Beatrice in some water from that river. None of us knows her future any more than we know our own. We will pray for her and hope for her. I hope the support that comes through this community will give her

² Michelle Alexander, “We Are Not the Resistance,” *The New York Times*, September 21, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/21/opinion/sunday/resistance-kavanaugh-trump-protest.html>.

parents all the tools they need to raise her to be secure, and fulfilled, and rooted in what is good and true. But the best thing we can do is to let her go already – entrust her to God so that when she reaches the age of awareness about death, or she finds her heart bruised by unkindness, or she finds herself going through that painful process of unlearning one thing in order to receive something new, she won't need to worry. "All will be thrown down" will sound to her ears less like a threat, and more like a promise and a blessing. A promise that God isn't going to leave the world as it is: the birth pangs of a water-borne blessing to come.