

Sermon for Nov. 15 2009 Mark 13

It is already Wednesday – it has now been raining since Sunday night – non stop. There are so many problems with flooding. The boys are worried for their families who live on the coast. We had a prayer service tonight – it was very moving – many tears were shed. There are four boys here – teens – with families on an island that is right next to the storm. They are so worried. There are no phone lines so no way to reach anyone. Tonight we prayed that the damn and river right next to where we are staying would not overflow. If that happens there will be no escape from the water. It worries me, even though I know God is in control and I shouldn't be worried.

It is now the sixth straight day of rain. The laundry does not dry and there is a stench in the air. Tonight we heard the center of the storm is coming this way. Many bridges are completely destroyed and we have no idea how we will get out of here. I need to turn this over to God. In my heart at times this is difficult and I wish I would be a better Christian.

Then Jesus asked his disciples: “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down. For Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes and famines and this is just the beginning of the birth pains.”

These words that we heard in our gospel lesson today spoken by Jesus reminded me of the feelings I experienced amidst the turmoil of the storm of which I just described. What I shared with you was a portion of my journal, written while I was on a mission trip to Honduras in Oct. of 1998. The storm I spoke of was Hurricane Mitch.

The gospel lesson we heard today from Mark is often called the "little apocalypse," because it sounds so much like the book of Revelation and other apocalyptic passages. An apocalypse is an unveiling, a revealing, a vision that grants its recipient a glimpse beyond what's going and in the bible these visions often include devastating circumstances.

Apocalyptic scripture writings throughout history have been misinterpreted. We have all heard of the predictions of when the end of the world will come and what will happen when it does.

I remember distinctly that people were predicting the end was definitely going to happen in the year 2000. Some people just have the need to know. Even the disciples wanted to know when the end is coming and what signs there will be. Jesus never gives a definite answer. What he does tell us is that many, including himself, will undergo great suffering before that time comes.

Apocalyptic passages are the ones we like to avoid because they don't sound to us like the loving god we all know so well. But this text is not made to give us simple answers, because many times the questions we have in life do not come with simple answers – as a matter of fact, sometimes they come with no answers whatsoever.

At first glance, our text looks like only a warning of destruction but we do not get the full reading of the text in the Gospel lesson we heard today. A few verses later in this very same chapter of Mark Jesus says these words to his disciples: “then they will see the son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. Then he will send out angels, and gather his people from the four winds from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.”

In keeping with other apocalyptic literature, Jesus uses signs and events of the day to signal the coming of the end of the current age. Yet, with this end is the birth of a new age. In the midst of the prediction of destruction lie the seeds of salvation.

Today we here this cry for salvation amongst people suffering or living their own apocalypse right now – a cry that yearns for God’s grace. We find in and through God’s grace the pathway through devastation and suffering to salvation.

Where do you find hope in your torn down walls? Where do you find salvation in the hurricane of your life? Maybe that ray of sunshine that bursts through the dark clouds is the knowledge that the death of your loved one helped saved the life of some one else. Or maybe it is during those moments when you know – you absolutely know deep in your being – that the one you miss so terribly is truly OK and at peace like no peace we know here on this earth.

Or maybe it is when you pull out that photo album of memories and give thanks or maybe it is when the unexpected check arrives just when you thought there was no way you could provide any more food for your family. Or perhaps it is when you pick up the phone to hear your best friends voice saying “I’m sorry”.

Or maybe it is when you realize amidst a tragedy in your life how many people are loving you, supporting you and praying for you.

I know there is hope amidst life's biggest disasters. I know it personally and I know it from you. People tell me all the time. Just this week alone I have had several people tell me that as bad as the tragedy they went through was – they realize how much they have grown closer to God and to others because of it.

One parishioner said to me last week after describing a very difficult time in her life “When a broken pot is glued back together, even if there are cracks in it is still beautiful.”

Another person said that if he hadn't had the illness himself he would not have been able to help the person who fell down in front of him with the very same illness.

And another parishioner read a note to me that was sent to her family member after a tragic accident – the note written by a pastor to a young man who was paralyzed in the accident said “This is a strange new world you are entering, not one anyone of us would have chosen for you. You will learn things about yourself and God and the power you two can have together that no one else can teach you. You and your family are surrounded by so much love. Something amazing will be

growing and taking shape in within you.”

When I began this sermon today I shared with you some excerpts from my journal. However I left some very important sentences out. I will share those with you now.

Well, the time has arrived. We were not sure if this moment would come. We made it to the capital city of Tegucigalpa with 18 of us piled in two four wheel drive pick up trucks travelling over very rough terrain through rivers where the bridges had been destroyed. And now here I sit on a plane to Houston. What a trip it has been. One I will never forget and am extremely thankful for. I pray for the country of Honduras and the thousands of people who lost their loved ones and homes. I also pray that somehow through this disaster people will be brought to Christ. I know that it has done that for me.

It was that frightening time in my life – that time in which the words of this Gospel lesson could be palpably felt – that changed me forever It was that event that caused me to go back to Honduras and help build houses for those who lost them in the Hurricane and it was that event that led me to stand in this pulpit before you today.

Jesus' words in the thirteenth chapter of Mark in some ways summarize the entire Gospel story – that there is no way around it – there will be suffering in our earthly world, but in the end – hope prevails and salvation will overcome all of that suffering. . The end of the story is not death, not destruction, not a grim ending to all that we hold dear but the end of the story is risen life. God help us to remember through whatever suffering we must endure that the end of the story is not Good Friday. The end of the story is the empty tomb. The end of the story is indeed life everlasting.