

A mom tells about her family's recent trip to our nation's capital. Standing in the grass in the national mall, her son looked one direction at the nation's capital and then the other direction at the Washington monument and commented, "Will this always be here?" If you were the parent at that moment and your child asked you that question, I am sure your first instinct would be to say, "of course they will always be here. They are very impressive structures."

But then as soon as you said this to your child, you may have remembered about the plane that went down in a field in Pennsylvania on September 11th, 2001 and realized that that plane was destined for either the capital building or the White House. And suddenly you would have said to yourself, "no, we don't know if these grand edifices will always be here."

I was able to go to Southern California a couple of weeks ago. I was in some intensive learning stuff for the first few days but then on Saturday we got the chance to do some sightseeing. One of the places we wanted to go was Beverly Hills. So we drove into Beverly Hills and parked on a road in front of the Beverly Hills Presbyterian Church. We are all Presbyterian pastors so we found ourselves naturally gravitating to this parking place. We then took a short walk and found ourselves on Rodeo Drive.

I wasn't really quite sure what I would find on Rodeo Drive. I just knew that this was a famous street with some very high priced stores. And so we walked down Rodeo Drive and marveled at the stores which were selling high end fashions and jewelry. I wanted some southern California trinkets and was hoping to find a Dollar Store but to my frustration there was not a Dollar Tree or Dollar General to be found.

But there was something on Rodeo Drive that I found that I did not expect to see. On Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills there are vacant store fronts with real estate signs in the windows.

As I looked at these for rent signs, I was wondering what it would cost to open a store on Rodeo Drive, but I was also wondering about the people who operated stores on Rodeo Drive who thought to themselves, “our store will always be here. We will always make a lot of money. We are in a secure place.” But alas, their store went out of business.

During this time of economic struggles, many of us are facing the reality that many of these things that we took for granted that would always be there are no longer there. Those of us who are school teachers have always lived under the impression that you would not be the best paid professional with a college degree or higher but you would always have a job. Well, everyone who is a school teacher or has a school teacher in your family knows that this is no longer the case. There are now more teachers looking for positions than there are positions available. Many of us were taught that if we worked hard in school, got a good education, applied ourselves in our profession that the reward would be a good job awaiting us. But many of us have had to face the reality that this is not always the case.

Some of us have been taught that we date the right person, get married, and play by the rules that we will be rewarded with a satisfying life. But something has happened and life has come crashing in around you. Marriages collapse, people die, people let you down. Many of us find ourselves in situations where we feel as though some things that we trusted are coming crashing down around us and we don't know what to do.

Jesus' disciples are in this boat. These country folks have come into the big city of Jerusalem and they are looking at the incredible size of the Temple. Having been to Jerusalem myself and stood next to one of these walls of the Temple I can tell you that it is an impressive structure. The bricks that made up the Temple were huge. And the disciples are impressed. So much so they are looking at this Temple and they say to themselves, “there is no way that this is ever going to come crashing down.” There is no way this is ever going to come crashing down.

Have you ever said that to yourself? Have you ever said to yourself, “there is no way that this, whatever this is, is ever going to come crashing down.” And you believed it for the longest time. But somehow, somehow very unexpectedly, something that you thought would stand forever has come crashing down and you have never been taught what to do when things come crashing down.

And when things come crashing down, this is a time when you and I and our community are most susceptible to false prophets. People who promise things to us that they cannot deliver but in our fear we become blind and follow. The wife who has been shunned by her husband is susceptible to the affair with the man who shows her some interest. The person down on their luck financially wanders into the pay day loan agency that promises to rescue them from debt.

The frustrated Christian hears a preacher say to them the end is near so give me your money and secure your soul in heaven and so lots of people do. We hear of wars and threats of war and violence and we fall prey to those who claim to be prophets who can rescue us from all of this tribulation.

In our gospel text this morning, we see all of this happening. Jesus’ followers are seeing things happen around them which they can’t explain so they are assuming that the end of time is near and destruction is all around them. But in the midst of all of these folks who are pushing their agenda of fear: Fear by the way makes a lot of people rich off of you and me. Fear being broadcast on television or radio stations makes us watch and listen to those channels. I mean, how much do you watch the weather on television when it’s sunny outside and how much do you watch it when the reporter is standing on the coast as a hurricane blows through?

Fear that we can’t live without whatever product makes us buy that product. Fear that we will be alone drives us into relationships that aren’t healthy for us. Be careful when people try to make you scared because people who are scared make some very irrational and impulsive decisions.

But Jesus is not irrational and he is not impulsive. Jesus is the exact opposite of irrational and impulsive. Jesus truly is the calm in the midst of the storm. When his followers are worried that the institutional church buildings will be destroyed and when people are worried about all of the wars and threats of war that they see, Jesus very calmly tells them, these are merely the beginning of birth pangs. Wars and destruction are merely the beginning of birth pangs.

Now I am no authority on birth pangs, but why would any woman go through the pain of being pregnant for 9 months and then going through the difficulty of child birth? Why would anyone go through the struggles of raising children because it ain't easy? Women and parents are willing to do this because they know that the birth pangs are just the beginning of life.

And giving birth is a very scary event. No one knows whether or not the child will live a few hours, days, months, or 100 years. But you go through all of that with the hope that the pain is but the beginning and that life is sacred and to be carried on.

The problem with fear is that we are drawn to fear. Our human depravity attracts us to fear. Kind of like a bug attracted to a bug zapper. And there are enough people in this world who have realized this and they prey on us responding to this fear so they can make a buck or two off of us or use us in some other way. But in our text Jesus tells us that being attracted to fear is not a healthy attraction. In fact, fear is a fatal attraction.

Imagine when we pull out today to head home, imagine that when we pull out to the intersection, we have the image of Jesus in one direction and the image of fear in the other direction. I'm not going to tell you which way to see Jesus and which way to find fear. I also remind you that there are cars coming from both directions.

But as you pull into the intersections of life, think to yourself, am I going to turn toward fear and follow those false prophets that tell me to be fearful of the future? Or am I going to turn toward the way of Jesus who offers me security in the future.

Fear is one direction. The way of Christ is the other. As you look to your future, which direction are you and I going to go.

Are we going to head toward the false prophets that want us to follow fear?

Or are we going to head toward the one named Jesus who offers us peace?
AMEN.

-Opening example found at http://www.lectionarysermons.com/novem_19.htm

-Text: Mark 13:1-8

-Given: November 15, 2009 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)