

Deep Wisdom

A Sermon on Mark 13:1-8 by the Rev. Philip Major
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As disciples of Jesus, how should we behave in dangerous, uncertain times? This is one of the themes of our Gospel passage. *One of Jesus' disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."*

Jesus' statement was prophetic. About thirty-five years after Jesus said these words, the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman army. As was true for Moses and Elijah, Jesus' status as a prophet was not about predicting future events with precision. Jesus' status as a prophet was an indication of the deep wisdom he brought to the challenges of life.

Jesus did not predict the exact date when the Temple would be destroyed. Jesus did not predict that the Roman army would destroy the Temple, because Jesus was not concerned with making predictions. Jesus was concerned with what is true. Jesus was concerned with the deeper truths of our lives.

Some of the disciples were very impressed with the magnificence of the Temple. Jesus told them a more fundamental truth; even the largest, most magnificent buildings made by human hands will eventually lie in ruins. This is a matter of wisdom, not fortune telling.

The disciples are like us. They want to know exactly when and what is going to happen. *When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?"*

Jesus doesn't attempt to answer their question. Instead, Jesus gives them wisdom about the challenges they will surely face, at some time in the future: *"Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come.*

PHEME PERKINS describes this passage with a simple phrase: "The evil times are not the end times." *For 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."* Do not be alarmed; the evil times are not the end times.

I'm pretty sure Jesus was not specifically predicting the destruction of Jerusalem, which would happen thirty-five years after his conversation with the disciples. Jesus was not specifically predicting the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, forty-five years after this conversation. Jesus is not making predictions; Jesus is sharing deep wisdom.

"Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down....Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed..."

As disciples we are disappointed, but not surprised, when we hear of wars and rumors of wars. As disciples we are concerned, but not surprised, when many come in the name of Christ, and claim great powers for themselves, and lead many astray. As disciples we are saddened, but not surprised when the great calamity happens, and not one stone of the great building is left standing. As disciples we are called to be people of deep wisdom.

The greatest blessing of my life is that, when I was a child I was surrounded by disciples of Jesus. Some of them had the kind of deep wisdom that reminds me of Jesus' words in this passage. Let me tell you about one of them.

Her name was Georgia House. Georgia House was about fifty years old when I knew her. Georgia did not own an automobile. Georgia did not have a high school diploma.

Georgia had one son named Tommie. Tommie was about twenty-five years old when I knew him. Tommie had cerebral palsy and could not walk. So each day Georgia would place a large box of fresh roasted peanuts on Tommie's lap, and push Tommie in his wheelchair two miles downtown to public square. Georgia earned her living by selling bags of fresh roasted peanuts to people as they got off the busses downtown, in the center of Cleveland. Georgia and Tommie did this five days a week, summer and winter.

I remember that Georgia was especially inspired by the leadership of the Rev. Martin Luther King. On the evening of August 27th, 1963, Georgia took Tommie to the bus station and bought a ticket for the Greyhound Bus to Washington, D.C. They rode through the night, and arrived in Washington the morning of August 28th, which was the day of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Georgia and Tommie listened to all of the speeches, including Martin Luther King's most famous speech of all, the one we remember with the phrase, "I Have a Dream." They didn't have money to pay for a hotel room, so at the end of the day, Georgia bought another bus ticket and they rode back to Cleveland, through the night.

Georgia was not a wealthy person, but Georgia possessed something more valuable than money; she had deep wisdom. One of the characteristics of Georgia's deep wisdom was that she made it plain to the people in her life that she loved them, just like Jesus. Georgia loved Tommie, Georgia loved the members of our congregation, and Georgia loved me. Another characteristic of Georgia's deep wisdom was that she was patient and courageous, just like Jesus. Another characteristic of Georgia's deep wisdom was that she was not surprised when things went terribly wrong.

Things went terribly wrong for Georgia and for every member of our little church on April 4, 1968, the day Dr. King was killed by an assassin's bullet. Georgia must have been heart-broken. She must have been grieving. But I'm pretty sure she wasn't surprised. Georgia had deep wisdom, the kind Jesus was trying to share with his disciples. Georgia had deep wisdom, so she never gave up on the hope God had given her. Georgia had deep wisdom, so she was not alarmed and she was never led astray. Georgia had deep wisdom, so she never stopped loving the people in her life. Georgia had deep wisdom, so she knew that God's work of justice and freedom is much larger than the good or evil accomplished by one generation.

Jesus shared the deep wisdom of God with us. *"Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down....Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed..."*

These are not predictions. This is deep wisdom. Nurture the deep wisdom God has given you. Do not be alarmed. Do not be surprised when things go terribly wrong. Do not be led astray by people who claim to have special powers. Like Jesus, be patient and courageous. Dig deeper into the wisdom God has given you. Like Jesus, make it plain to the people in your life that you love them. Like Jesus, let the deep wisdom God has given you be in the center of your life.