

“Future Shock”

Mark 13:1-8

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This morning our attention is drawn to one of the most shocking predictions Jesus made. It appears to have caught the disciples completely by surprise and left them momentarily speechless. Listen as I share the details of this event from Mark’s perspective.

Jesus and the disciples traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Throughout the week, Jesus talked to the religious leaders about a variety of subjects—the purpose of the Temple, the duty to pay taxes, the most important commandments and the meaning of offerings.

As this day was drawing to a close, Jesus and the disciples left the Temple. Passing through the gate leading to the Mount of Olives, one of the disciples said, “Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!” (Mark 13:1)

This sounds like the words of someone visiting the Temple for the first time, which might have been the case for all the disciples. After all, they grew up in rural Galilee and were busy making a living for their families. Perhaps they had never made this long journey to Judea to actually see what others had described.

Whether it was their first visit or they had been there before, they were impressed with the size and beauty of this grand facility. It had to be the most majestic building they had ever seen.

According to Katherine Grieb, Professor of Biblical Interpretation and New Testament at Virginia Theological Seminary, the Temple occupied a platform more than 900 by 1,500 feet.

The huge retaining walls that supported the Temple were composed of great white stones as long as forty feet.

Much of the front of the Temple, at least a 150 foot square, was decorated with silver and gold. On a sunny day, it nearly blinded anyone who looked at it.

The combination of the Temple mount, the platform of huge retaining stones and the large stones of the Temple itself raised the structure to a height that could be seen for miles by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. No wonder this peasant disciple from Galilee said what he did as he walked out of the Temple.

If he was expecting Jesus to comment on the Temple's splendor and bask in its glory as he was doing, he got a rude awakening. Instead, Jesus dropped a bombshell on him and all the disciples.

"Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone will be left on top of another; everyone will be thrown down." (Mark 13:2)

Nothing else was said about the destruction of the Temple until Jesus and the disciples crossed over to the Mount of Olives and stopped to look back. At that time, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked Jesus when this devastation would occur and if there would be signs indicating it was near.

Jesus told them what to look for in terms of political strife, natural disasters and discrimination against them, which had to unnerve them. Being tortured and killed for living by Jesus' ethic of love was not what they bargained for when they accepted the call to follow him.

Why do you think Jesus told his disciples these alarming things? It appears he felt they needed to know the relationship between the Jews and Romans, which was contentious at best, would continue to spiral downward and reach a boiling point. Eventually, the Roman emperor would lose patience with the rebellious Jews and destroy the city of Jerusalem and their beloved Temple. Even some of Jesus' followers would get swept up in this Roman rage and be targeted for abuse and crucifixion.

This prediction came true in 70 A.D. After years of conflict between the Romans and inhabitants of Judea, the Roman army was sent into Jerusalem with orders to destroy everything in sight. Only a portion of the western wall of the Temple, referred to now as “The Wailing Wall” survived the onslaught.

So, as the disciples looked in awe at the Temple complex while leaving that day, Jesus tried to direct their attention away from their admiration of this massive structure to an awareness that even the most spectacular human achievement, in this case the Temple, would not last forever. As large, strong, imposing, intimidating and majestic as the Temple was, it, too, could and would be destroyed, leaving it in rubble.

Furthermore, Jesus wanted them to know while the Temple, the symbol of beauty and strength would fade away, God would not. God would come to them in their brokenness and help them to rebuild their lives so they could move forward.

They might lose what human hands had made, but they would never be left empty handed or hopeless. The same God who delivered their ancestors out of despair when they were slaves in Egypt or Babylon would come to them in their time of need and help them chart a new path.

This was important for the disciples to know, along with Mark’s readers who were actually living during these perilous times, because their consistent witness to what Jesus revealed about the nature of God and God’s agenda for the world would be needed then more than ever. Their commitment to pursue truth, justice and peace, as Jesus did, would need to remain their highest priority even in perilous times.

How does this story speak to us this morning? I pondered this question for some time last week and recalled a discussion where this idea was mentioned. *We may have to lose what we thought we would always have to find what we can never lose.*

I am convinced the disciples never dreamed the Temple would be destroyed. First of all, it was too large to come down, and secondly it was too important.

The Temple represented the dwelling place of God and the symbol of God's presence with Israel. For this reason, it was inconceivable to the disciples the Temple would be destroyed, that is until Jesus predicted this very thing would happen.

What or who have you lost you never thought you would? Was it a child, your beloved mate of many years or your loving parents? Was it your health or your job? Was it your savings or your house? Was it a sharp mind or an ability to remember clearly? Was it the neighbor you depended upon or the friend who had been with you since childhood?

When did your rock-solid world start crumbling and falling in around you? How did you feel? How do you feel now?

The level of anxiety the disciples must have felt when Jesus told them the Temple would not always be there had to be astronomical. I wonder if a day went by the disciples did not think about what Jesus predicted. I doubt it.

How would they survive? How could they climb over the rubble and get on with their lives? Would there be anything to live for or a faith community to sustain them?

Jesus was aware of their anxiety, and it appears he spent a good portion of his remaining days preparing them for what was to come and encouraging them to rely upon God to see them through it. Yes, there would be life on the other side of loss, and God would be there to help them move forward, using their testimonies to inspire those climbing out of their own rubble.

What would you tell someone whose world has coming crashing down upon them? How can you help those around you who are experiencing as high a level of anxiety and despair as the disciples?

Assure them God is not threatened by the things that threaten them. Because of this, there may come a time when they will lose beloved relationships and precious things, but they will never lose everything if they cling to their faith in an eternal and loving God.

God will take them by the hand and help them travel down unfamiliar roads. God will strengthen, enlighten and empower them to rebuild their lives and chart a new course. Along that difficult journey, God will use them to help others who are struggling with their own loss and sense of despair.

On this new journey of self-discovery and life, they will discover, above all else, what is truly important, genuine and permanent and seek these things. As they do, they will find a reason for living and a quality of life that defy logic and will lift them above any calamity.

Let me encourage you to share the lesson the disciples learned in today's text with those who are anxious about their future. They, too, may have to lose what they thought they would always have to find what they can never lose.

Reinforce this with your own testimony. Let them know what you have found on this side of loss that has transformed your life, brought about healing and given you hope.