

WE CAN STAND FIRM ON THAT WHICH GOD HAS BUILT
Sermon for the 26th Sunday after Pentecost, 2018
Mark 13:1-13

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon is our Gospel from before, Mark 13:1-13: ¹ **As Jesus was going out of the temple, one of His disciples told Him, “Teacher, look at these massive stones and magnificent buildings!”**

² **Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Truly, not one stone will be left on another. Every one will be thrown down.”**

³ **As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked Him privately: “Tell us when these things will happen, and what the miraculous sign will be when all these things are going to be fulfilled!”**

⁵ **Jesus began to tell them, “Beware that no one deceives you! ⁶ Many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am He,’ and will deceive many. ⁷ When you hear about wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed! Such things must happen, but that is not yet the end. ⁸ For one nation will rise against another nation and one kingdom against another kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and there will be famines. These things are the beginning of birth-pains.**

⁹ **“Nevertheless, watch out for yourselves! For they will hand you over to councils, and you will be beaten in the synagogues. You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, in order to testify to them. ¹⁰ The Good News must also first be preached to all nations. ¹¹ When they are taking you away to hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what to say! Instead, say whatever is given you at that time! For you are not the ones who are speaking, but the Holy Spirit. ¹² A brother will betray his brother to death and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and cause them to be put to death. ¹³ All people will also hate you because of My name. However, he who endures to the end will be saved.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

So much of what we do is focused on the future. Parents spend time and resources on education so their children will have a future. Economists study thousands of variables in the marketplace to predict the future for investors. Environmentalists warn of atmospheric changes that could threaten the future. What about you? What is your future? Wouldn't it be interesting to know if the future were bright with promise and hope, or dark with rising evil and despair? How do you, as a believer in Jesus Christ, face the future? If the future is as unstable as the media presents it, of what can we be certain? What can we cling to? On what can we stand?

Jesus' words from our Gospel teach us that the things of this world which appear solid will not stand, while the one thing that appears powerless - the cross - provides us with the strength to endure to the end. The magnificent temple in Jerusalem with its massive stones was destroyed just 40 years after the disciples marvelled at it. But the one who trusts in the crucified and resurrected Lord Jesus Christ will remain unshaken and stand firm until the end.

The future is revealed by Jesus Christ. In just a few days, Jesus would be betrayed, tried, scourged, and crucified. His life of perfect obedience was rushing toward the climax of the cross. However, on this day He taught in the temple. He told parables. He debated with Pharisees and Herodians and Sadducees. He commended the offering of the widow who gave two small copper coins.

As they left the temple, the disciples behaved much like tourists do who peer up at the skyscrapers of a modern city. Any why not - the temple in Jerusalem was perhaps more spectacular than anything they would have ever seen. It truly was spectacular. Herod the Great started rebuilding it in about 20 B.C. The rebuilding, which included the courtyards and the surrounding walls, was still in progress at this time. The stones were massive. Some of them, as the ancient historian Josephus tells us, were 12 metres by 4 metres by 3 metres. Nor was the temple just one building, but a complex of buildings. One of the disciples even expressed his admiration for the beautiful temple and thought that here surely was something built to stand as long as this world would. **“Teacher, look at these massive stones and magnificent buildings!”** he would not have been expecting the reply Jesus gave. Jesus says it will all be destroyed. **“Do you see these great buildings? Truly, not one stone will be left on another. Every one will be thrown down.”**

It seems that it was in shocked silence that the disciples followed Jesus to the Mount of Olives. There they had a full view of the temple compound in all its glory. It was then that four disciples, the first ones chosen by Jesus¹, asked Him a question to which all

¹ Mark 1:16-20

of them desired an answer. ⁴ **“Tell us when these things will happen, and what the miraculous sign will be when all these things are going to be fulfilled!”**

Jesus did not answer them with a parable. Instead, He uttered a prophecy. His words simultaneously reveal the events at the very end of time when He will return in power and glory, and the condition of His saints all through the time between His ascension and return. Jesus offers four different types of signs. Each describes the collapse of a foundation in which people may put their trust.

The first foundation that crumbles is religion. **“Beware that no one deceives you...”** Jesus says. The first sign is *deception*.

Notice where the deception takes place! It is deception by false doctrine spread among believers. Jesus said that ⁶ **Many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am He,’ and will deceive many**. The unscrupulous deceive many by claiming to be Christ, or by offering a flimsy substitute for Christ. They appeared before the destruction of Jerusalem, and there have been many since. They are among us even today.

While many today will say they have no religion, or are hostile toward religion, there are those who will harbor a naive attitude toward religion. Such believe that if something is spiritual, then it must be all right, or even benign. This attitude considers the increase in spirituality in our culture today to be good. New Age spirituality, eastern religions, harmony with mother earth, feminist religions, and even dabbling in the occult may mistakenly be welcomed as the opening of the heart of mankind to things spiritual.

However, this is all deception. It turns the soul away from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, back to the evil spirit of darkness that inhabits the heart of unregenerate man. It robs the soul of Jesus Christ.² It was the father of lies who promised back in the Garden of Eden, *“You will be like God,”* (Gen. 3:5).

We must always be on our guard and never assume that anything religious conveys God’s truth. The gods and religions of this world, like the massive stones of the temple, will all be torn down.

The second foundation overthrown is the bedrock of *political power*.

Jesus continues, ⁷ **When you hear about wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed! Such things must happen, but that is not yet the end**. Many base their sense of security on governments, since they wield tremendous clout in the world. But no nation, not even the most powerful in the world, will last forever! Nations rise and fall. This is the second sign.

The fall of communism shows what happens to people who hope in the state, only to see it crumble before their very eyes (while Christianity survived the 70 years of persecution). What will fill the void? Perhaps a renewed faith in God?

While political constructions of government are a blessing in our democracy, do not assume they will endure to the end. They, like the massive stones of the temple, will all be torn down.

The third sign described by Jesus is distress in the *natural world*.

He says, **There will be earthquakes in various places, and there will be famines. These things are the beginning of birth-pains**. Creation has been groaning under the burden of sin.³ There appears to be increased drought in our country. We hear of devastating wild fires burning in California. In recent history there has been earthquakes and tsunamis, and volcanoes erupting. It appears as though these natural disasters are occurring with greater frequency.

The natural order, created by God, is awesome in its complexity and beauty. But like the massive stones of the temple, it will be torn down. As Psalm 46 reminds us, *“the earth quakes and the mountains topple into the middle of the seas, although its water roars and foams and the mountains quake with its surging ... Nations rage, kingdoms totter. He utters His voice, the earth melts.”* The earth and its mountains seem solid and indestructible, but they will be dissolved.

The fourth foundation to fall shocks us. The *family* becomes a sign of the end.

¹² **A brother will betray his brother to death and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and cause them to be put to death**. The fourth sign is not just persecution from without, but betrayal from within the family.

Our personal commitments to one another, even the closest relationships of family, do not provide eternal security. As important and God-pleasing as they are, if we put our trust in them, we will be shaken, so we never assume human relationships are the immovable foundation on which to stand. All around us we see how they can fall like the massive stones of the temple.

The four signs describe the conditions in every generation. Their number and intensity do not tell us whether our generation is the last. Rather, the signs teach us to watch, be ready, and to stand firm on the foundation that cannot be shaken. All that people build finally will be torn down. What God builds endures. **“He who endures to the end will be saved.”** How can we stand firm when everything seems to be crumbling? Jesus is clear: we can stand firm on that which God has built.

² 1 Timothy 4:1

³ Romans 8:20

In Baptism we were joined to Christ's death and raised again to new life in Him.⁴ In Baptism God has given us the forgiveness of sin, the Holy Spirit, and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.⁵ What a marvel! Things as solid as the massive stones of the temple do not last, while something as passing as the speaking of words and the pouring of water endures to the end. People build structures, while God creates eternal life.

God's promise stands firm because it is built on the perfect life of Jesus, and on His blood poured out for us on the cross. And why did that have to happen? Because of another foundation, another sign of the end which had to be pulled down: *our sin*.

We really do not need any signs of the end other than the hatred and lust in our hearts, the deception and lies on our lips, the weapons in our hands, or the grudges on our minds. All point to our estrangement from our Creator.

But the precious blood of Jesus was shed so that our sins are forgiven before God. Our baptismal burial with Jesus fixes His cross to us, and our baptismal rising with Jesus fixes us to His resurrection. Through this work done by the Holy Spirit, we now know where we can stand firm to the end and not be moved: the cross.

The signs of the end have their purpose. They warn of God's judgment against sin in the world, and of the coming end. The signs of the end also expose false foundations that will be moved and removed on the last day. Standing on the promise of Jesus and His cross, we shall not be moved. Firmly placed, we find another sign in the text, overlooked before, but which now stands out: **"The Good News must also first be preached to all nations."** This is our future, brothers and sisters in Christ, and it is glorious! We must not waste our time being concerned about the exact date when the Lord will come again. Rather, let us go forward using our time and talents to witness for Him. As the world continues it spiral toward the end, we do not fear, for the Holy Spirit, yes, Christ Himself⁶ will help us face and overcome any trial that comes our way. And besides, we know what the end spells – nothing but the salvation of our souls! To Jesus be all glory! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Almighty God, heavenly Father, we worship You for You are holy and righteous. Your glory fills the universe; Your mercy is never-ending; Your truth lasts for ever. We, Your people, ask You to be in our midst and to hear our prayers.

We thank You for all Your mercies, which are new to us every day. We praise You for leading us from the darkness of sin and death to eternal light through Your Word. We thank You for every blessing, in particular for the gift of Your Son Jesus Christ, who, though Lord of all, took the nature of a servant, appeared in human likeness and became a man like us. We worship Him who humbled Himself and walked the path of obedience all the way to death on a cross, so that we might receive the forgiveness of sins, the assurance of eternal life, and the certainty of the glorious resurrection of the body on the Last Day. Strengthen our hope in Your promise of everlasting life, and through the assurance that You have chosen Your own and recorded their names in Your book of life before the foundation of the world.

O Lord, confirm us in our freedom from the sting of sin and make us strong through Jesus' victory over the grave. Give us such faith and hope in Christ that we may conquer all fear of death, and live in the confidence that, because He lives, we shall also live for ever.

Protect us from the troubles of this world, from its false messiahs and prophets, and from the tribulation of the last days. Teach us how short our lives are, that we may be wise and live safely in Your truth and love.

Bless the work that we do in Your name, and grant that we may keep on doing it untiringly while it is day, before the night finally falls on this world. Move us to share our resources with the less fortunate and to work for the well-being of all people. Cleanse Your Church from everything impure and false, that it may be pure and faultless when the Lord returns. Provide your church with preachers who are strong in faith.

Rule and direct the nations of the earth. Undermine all human pride and arrogance, and destroy all slavery and oppression. Stand by those who are persecuted. Uphold all who live in reverence and obedience to You. Free our country from all evil. Direct our leaders; give us statesmen who are upright, business and labour leaders who are unselfish, and scientists and teachers who are God-fearing. Give us weather that is appropriate to our needs.

Look in mercy on all who are sick, on all who have burdens of body, mind, or spirit. Heal them according to Your love and their need. Comfort all who are bereaved, and wipe all tears from our eyes.

Give us the peace that passes all human understanding, and the hope that never fades away. We ask all these things in the name that is above every other name: Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord. Amen.

⁴ Romans 6:4

⁵ Acts 3:38-39

⁶ Luke 21:15

26th Sunday after Pentecost

Daniel 12:1-3

¹ “At that time Michael, the great prince, who stands to protect the descendants of your people, will rise up. There will be a time of distress unlike any that has occurred since there has been a nation until that time. Nevertheless, at that time every one of your people who is found written in the book will be rescued. ² Many of those who are asleep in the land of dust will wake up, some to everlasting life and others to shame and everlasting abhorrence. ³ Moreover, those who have insight will shine like the bright dome of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness like the stars for ever and ever.

Hebrews 10:11-25

¹¹ Every priest stands ministering every day, and repeatedly offering the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² However, when this Priest had offered one sacrifice for sins, which is good for ever, He sat down at the right hand of God. ¹³ Since that time, He is waiting for His enemies to be made a footstool for His feet. ¹⁴ For by one offering He has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy. ¹⁵ The Holy Spirit also witnesses to us. For, after He has said, ¹⁶ “‘This is the Covenant that I shall make with them after those days,’ says the Lord: ‘I shall put My Laws on their hearts and write them on their minds,’” ¹⁷ He then adds: “I shall certainly not remember their sins and their lawless deeds any more.” ¹⁸ Where these have been forgiven, there is also no offering for sin any more. ¹⁹ Therefore, fellow-Christians, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new, living way that He has opened for us through the curtain, that is, through His body, ²¹ and since we have a High Priest over the house of God, ²² let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith! For our hearts have been sprinkled to take away guilty consciences, and our bodies have been washed with pure water. ²³ Let us cling to the confession of our hope without wavering! For He who has made the promise is faithful.

²⁴ Let us also consider how we may stimulate one another to love and to do good works! ²⁵ Let us not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as some are regularly

doing, but let us continue to encourage one another, and so much more as you see the day approaching!

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