

LETTING GO
(Mark 13:1-8)

Following the daily news can be a confusing, exasperating experience. Let me give you an example. As you all know by now, the House of Representatives voted on a health care bill just a week ago. The vote was close – 220 in favor - 215 opposed. In my opinion, the House bill didn't go nearly far enough, but that's not the point. Whether the Senate will go along is still up in the air, but that's not the point, either. Actually, that's exactly the point, but it's not the point I'm making today.

Here's my point: for everyone who celebrates that the House at least passed some kind of bill, there is someone out there who thinks this is a terrible thing. I really don't get their thinking, but it's a fact. Good news for some, bad news for others. That's the way it is with political news. It's never just news; it's either good news or bad news. And it all depends on how you look at it.

In today's lesson, Jesus gives his disciples some news. The temple – that grand edifice, that crown jewel of King Herod's massive building program – is going to be leveled. Not one stone will be left standing.

I'm not sure we can even begin to understand how devastating that news would have been. Jews considered the temple the center of the earth. It was the visible sign of God's presence. It was eternal. We know what it was like when the Twin Towers fell. The destruction of the temple went beyond that. Maybe if the 9/11 hijackers had hit the Capital and the White House along with the Towers, that might have come close to what Jews felt when the temple fell.

So this is bad news – very bad news – indeed. Except Jesus doesn't seem to see it that way. He seems pretty matter of fact about it. He compares it to a birth, which is normally good news.

It all depends on how you look at it.

Take an example from history. Imagine you were living in Savannah, Georgia, in 1864 and a messenger rode into town to say that General Sherman and his army were 50 miles away and headed in your direction. That would be terrible news! Sherman made war on civilians. He burned homes and crops and stole horses and mules. He was a war criminal! That's what I learned growing up in the South. Sherman was bad news. But what if you were a slave? Sherman's headed this way? Hallelujah! He's a liberator, he's a savior! Sherman's army brought the jubilee.

It all depends on how you look at it.

Apocalyptic literature – the kind that we heard this morning, the kind that speaks about the destruction of things the way they are – isn't very popular among people whose lives are comfortable, whose children are well fed, well housed, and well futured. In other words, it isn't very popular with people like us. The present order has been good to us. Why on earth would we want to hear that God is going to shake it all up? That would be bad news in lots of ways.

But what if the way things are isn't the way God intends them to be? I confess I'm a bit schizophrenic about this. On the one hand, I kind of like things the way they are. I'm pretty comfortable, don't have any real needs. But on the other hand, I do have this nagging feeling that God has something else in mind, that God isn't real pleased when the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, that God isn't real pleased that we spend as much on the military in one year as the health care bill would cost in ten years, that God isn't real pleased that more than a billion people on earth are hungry, that a child dies from hunger-related causes every five seconds. I have this nagging feeling that God isn't real pleased with our priorities, including some of mine.

So sure, hearing that God's going to shake things up sounds like bad news to me. But how do you think it sounds to those billion hungry people or the mothers and fathers who watch their children die because they can't get enough food or clean water or basic medical care? I'll bet it sounds like very good news to them.

It all depends on whether you're on the top looking down or the bottom looking up. Why do health insurance companies and Wall Street investment banks spend millions of dollars on lobbyists? Because they like their comfortable perch on top of the pyramid. Tough regulations might bring the whole thing crashing down – and that's the last thing they want.

C. S. Lewis said that Christians are "too easily pleased." We settle in and settle down; we get comfortable and content with the status quo: "Well, this is the best of all possible worlds, so there's no point looking for anything better; this is it."

When we start thinking that human institutions are imbued with divine permanence, along comes a passage like the one we heard this morning to remind us that God isn't done with us or our world. Someone once asked me about the kingdom of God, what it would be like. All I could say was, "I don't know for sure, but I'm pretty sure this ain't it."

Of course, there's a problem. We can't get to wherever it is God wants us to get if we're hanging on to things the way they are. We have to let go. That's what Jesus was saying to his disciples. They couldn't imagine anything ever happening to the temple they adored and revered so much. Jesus warns them not to get too attached. Herod's temple has to be destroyed to make way for God's.

A woman once said to me when her husband died, "I thought my life was over. I didn't have anything to live for. My world was destroyed." Well, she didn't die herself. She went on living – not with the same life, but a new life. It certainly wasn't what she would have chosen. But she found new things that filled her life with meaning and purpose, volunteering and traveling and reconnecting with old friends. She learned how to move from bad news to good news.

When my boss told me that most of my job was probably going to be transferred to New York, I had a moment of "How can they do this to me! And what am I going to do now?" All I knew was that I wasn't going to New York since that was about the last place I wanted to live or work. So then I started to

think about the possibilities. Going to seminary had been in the back of my mind for a while, and this gave me the chance. It wasn't long before I was praying, "Please, don't let them change their minds; please, send my job to New York." They didn't change their minds, thank God, and the rest, as they say, is history. The corporate decision that I didn't have any control over freed me to do what I didn't quite have the guts to do on my own.

Churches can be among the worst offenders when it comes to resisting change. We hang onto our old ways of doing things even when it's clear they're not working. I know I'm guilty of that when it comes to applying technology to church. I like books better than the internet. But the churches that are flourishing are embracing technology. They have interactive websites and use Facebook and all those things I've heard about but haven't quite been willing to try, let alone embrace. As a result, we're missing out on opportunities.

It's only human to cling to what we have and what we know. It's hard-wired into us because in evolutionary terms, sticking with the familiar has survival value. But it can also hold us back and stunt our growth, keep us from realizing the fullness and abundance that God offers us.

As you probably know, our youth are going on a mission trip to the Pine Ridge Reservation next summer. Pine Ridge is one of the poorest places in this country. The unemployment rate is between 80-90%, per capita income is \$4,000, alcoholism is as high as 80%, life expectancy is the second lowest in the Western Hemisphere (only Haiti's is lower). If we ask one of the Oglala Lakota living on the reservation what he or she thinks about today's lesson – good news or bad news? – what do you think the answer would be? I wouldn't be at all surprised if the answer came back "Good news!"

When Jesus foretold the destruction of the temple, he wasn't just having a bad day or feeling cranky. He was speaking for all the people who have been beaten down, abused, neglected, used up and thrown away. He was speaking for Palestinians living in refugee camps, for people starving in Sudan, for children working in sweatshops in China and Indonesia. He was speaking for the Oglala Lakota at Pine Ridge.

God says over and over, "This is not how I intend the world to be; this world is not your ultimate home. I am still working, still creating, still re-making this world as I dream of it being." The question is: Can we hear that as good news?