

Ultimate Things

This sermon was preached by the Rev. Richmond Webster on Sunday, November 15, 2009 and is based Mark 13:1-2.

As Jesus came out of the Temple, one of the 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.” Mark 13:1-2

To make some sense out of this lesson from the 13th chapter of Mark, we first need to go back to a much older story from our Bibles.

Around the year 1350 BC, God liberated a bunch of ragtag slaves from bondage in the land of Egypt, and he did this with signs and wonders. Led by Moses, God split the Red Sea, led them through the desert with fire and smoke, fed them bread from heaven and water from a rock. God called them his chosen, and he promised them a home.

He also gave them His law, but this is a sad part of the story. While Moses had gone to the top of a high mountain to receive this law from God, and since he had been gone for longer than anyone expected, God’s people became distracted.

It happened this way: while they were waiting, they gathered up the gold they had among them and they fashioned a golden calf, an idol to worship. You should know how the story goes by now because you have seen the movie. At least I hop you’ve seen the movie—I taught this lesson to our teenagers not too long ago and I was shocked that they didn’t know about Charlton Heston, or Yul Brenner, or the green mist coming out of the sky, or the red Sea parting that was the ultimate movie special effect of my childhood, though now it looks suspiciously like green jello.

Still, I’m counting on most of you here to remember the scene, with Moses gone and the golden calf in place, and a slimy Edward G Robinson who was the cause of it all saying “Where’s your Messiah now?”

My point is this: That golden calf in the desert wasn’t the first idol for God’s people, or the last. There is something in human nature that wants to go with what we know, and to put our trust in what we can see or control. There is something in human nature that loves an idol.

A good definition for idols might be helpful here, since most of us don’t have a golden calf lying around somewhere. But an idol, by definition, happens when even a good thing becomes an ultimate thing.

And while my teenage class hadn’t seen the movie, they got this point immediately. They all knew something about the idols of beauty, of celebrity, of technology, of status, of money, to name a few.

This brings me to a second point about idols and this point will take us to the heart of our Gospel lesson: If it is our human nature to make idols, then we also need to be aware and be warned that idols will fail us. Idols will fail because idols are not ultimate things.

I’m fond of saying that we all learned something about idols these days, suffering the worst economic downturn since the great depression, and it was about this time last year when we watched in horror as our economy seemed to be in a free fall. Institutions like AIG, General Motors, or Lehman were never supposed to fail or need to be saved, and yet even the experts were scratching their heads as vast stores of wealth came crashing down, not one stone left upon another. Idols will fail.

Jesus knew this, and by the time we get to the 13th chapter of Mark, he also knew his time on earth was short, which could have contributed to his mood as they all left the temple precincts that day. I can only imagine the temple in all of its glory, gleaming in the sunlight, smoke billowing from a thousands sacrifices, courtyards filled with sights and sounds and people... It must have been something.

Historians call the Temple in Jerusalem one of the wonders of the ancient world, but Jesus still knew the difference between good things and ultimate things. In less than four decades this temple would be destroyed, just as he said, not one stone left upon another, but there is more to his message than just a prediction.

Jesus taught that day in a picturesque and vivid style largely unfamiliar in our world but completely understandable for 1st century people. This style is called “apocalyptic”, and it means a revealing, or a disclosure, and apocalyptic themes usually involves the end of time and the destruction of things that are not ultimate things. Revelation, for instance, is written in this style and with this language.

It is probably a good time for us to talk about all this, given the anxiety over a new movie called 2012, which involves much better special effects than green jello and involves the end of the world, as predicted by a Mayan calendar.

In other words, it is easy to read this apocalyptic stuff in our Bibles the same way, but I ask that we all remember what Jesus said about the end of time, that we would never know when that would happen (Mayan calendars included). Rather, I believe Jesus used the images and style of apocalyptic to remind his friends of what we’ve been thinking about this morning.

The message is simple: Idols fail. Things fall apart, and loss is a part of life—whether we are talking about lost money, lost health, lost heart, lost hope.

For this reason, we need to hang on to something that will last, something that will not fail, something ultimate, and it is here, in this strange lesson from Mark’s Gospel, we encounter the good news of the Gospel. His name is Jesus. We can hang on to Him.

I saw a television show last week about troop greeters who volunteer in the airport terminal in Bangor, Maine. I’ve heard there are troop greeters in most of our major airports, old veterans and others who volunteer to stand inside airport terminals to welcome soldiers returning from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Bangor airport is special, in that it is the first US stop for soldiers arriving from the war, and because of its Northeastern location, these volunteer greeters have to get up during all hours of the day and night in order to give a hug, a free cell phone call, a salute, a word of thanks. It is patriotic, it is courageous and it is beautiful.

On this television show, they also told the story of the greeters themselves, old men and women who were battling loss—lost spouses, lost health, lost purpose. And it was here, in the carpeted halls of an airport terminal, that young soldiers meet old soldiers in an embrace of common humanity.

They all have been fighting something, but here, if only for a moment, there is rest.

This is not a Christian story, necessarily, but I believe it is pure Gospel. It is not a Christian story, but it reminds us that we are all veterans of many battles and all veterans of loss. It is not a Christian story, but it reminds us that we can put the idols down, idols that distract us, idols that fail us, idols that in time will

cease to exist. We can put them down and hold fast to Jesus, our Lord and Savior and ultimate, who loves us so and will never let us go.

Put the idols down, and rest. This is the message. Put the idols down, and hang on to Jesus.