

TEXT: MARK 13:1-8  
THEME: The beginning of the birth pangs  
SUBJECT: Transition  
TITLE: Change

26th Sunday after Pentecost  
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Messiah Moravian  
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Mother Goose, the first poet many children memorize, wrote:

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall  
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall  
All the King's horses and all the King's men  
Couldn't put Humpty together again.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus isn't talking about the fall of an individual but the fall of the walls of the Temple, the heart of God's presence on earth. Where would God go? Jesus is talking about the destruction of religious and political institutions that have been the center of Jewish life.

We are accustomed to the fall of leaders, be they CEO's like Travis Kalanick of UBER, presidents like Richard Nixon, religious leaders like Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, but we are less familiar with the fall of the walls that support our way of life.

The old order is dying, Jesus says, do not be alarmed. Yet, we are alarmed. The more vested we are in the old order, the more our possessions, prestige and power are dependent upon the old order, the more alarmed we are. Many charlatans profit off the fears of the alarmed, promising to rebuild the walls of the old order.

Jesus cautions against buying what these charlatans are selling. Jesus tells the disciples the death of the old order is not the end of the world, just the end of a particular way of life. The old order must die to make way for the birth of the new. Don't be alarmed!

The magnificent temple rebuilt by Herod was completed only a few years before Jesus declared: "Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." About forty years later, the Romans sacked, burned, and destroyed the Temple creating a great crisis in Judaism. If you want a sense of the alarm caused by this crisis, think the Holocaust.

Now you may want to quibble with Jesus, especially if you have been to Jerusalem and visited the Western Wall. A few stones remain one upon another. But remember, it is called the Wailing Wall for a reason. Those few stones stand as a reminder of the destruction of the old order. An end. But not the end. Out of this loss arose rabbinic Judaism centered, not in the Temple but in the synagogue, focused not on ritual sacrifice but on teaching.

We live in a time when the thick walls of the old order are being thrown down all around us. While this alarms many, it also represents hope for others who have been disadvantaged by the old order. The Civil Rights Act threatened some white folk and opened doors for many African-

Americans. The feminist movement threatened many men and liberated many women. The information age threatens blue collar workers and is a boom to tech savvy teenagers.

We live and move and have our being in God, but the church as an institution, lives and moves and has its being in the social order. The church is not immune to changes in the social order. The more identified the church is with any particular order the more alarmed it will be by threats to that order.

Just as the King's men cannot put Humpty together again, neither can we rebuild the walls of exclusion that have barred minorities, women, LGBTQ folk from full participation in the life of the church. We need not be alarmed by these changes. They are but the birth pangs of new life.

Many thoughtful observers believe the church must meet five challenges if it is to flourish in the new order. First, the church must become less clergy centered and more focused on motivating its members to discover and exercise their gifts.

Second, the church needs to create ways to effectively connect its core teachings with real life. 36% of millennials identify as either atheist, agnostic, or "nothing in particular." The church and its teaching, in their view, has very little, if anything, to do with the "real world."

Third, we need an integrated faith practice that engages body, mind, heart and soul. The recovery of the practice of contemplative prayer is a step in the right direction. Connecting the inward journey with the outward journey, the contemplative life with a life of service, engages the whole person in faithful living.

One of the ironies of the new order is that we have ever greater technical means of connecting with each other, yet feel more alienated than ever. The fourth challenge the church must meet is to feed the deep hunger for community, for communion, for knowing and being known.

Finally, the church that loses its life in mission will find life in the kingdom of God. The church exists, not as an end, but as a means to create a more equitable, a more just, a more humane order.

Servant Leadership is a program that addresses these five challenges better than anything else I know. It is an introduction to Christian faith and practice for our time and place. It requires significant commitment of participants. Giving birth to new life is hard work, painful even, but so is dying hanging on to the old order.

Trying to rebuild the walls of the old order is as futile as the king's men trying to put Humpty together again. The walls of exclusion must be torn down to make way for the advent of the kingdom of God. Do not be alarmed. This is but the birth pangs of new life.