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Mark 13:14-23

While I was in the process for ordination, I had one year between my college graduation and when I was able to attend seminary. At 22 years old, with a marketable degree in Philosophy and Communications, I tried to find any job that could sustain my living expenses. I was, surprise, mostly unsuccessful, until I learned of a program that trained people how to be chaplains in a hospital. And I was thankfully accepted. I served as a chaplain at three hospitals in Oklahoma City: including the public University Hospital and a Children's Hospital. The experience was an amazing time of growth and difficulty, facing the issues of life and death, as one does in a hospital. And at the end of my time at Children's and University Hospitals, I was eager to go to seminary and take my bite out of the Big Apple. Before I could leave, however, I was issued a challenge by my fellow chaplains who had become good friends. And I must inform you that my fellow chaplains were Southern Baptists, Nazarenes, and even Pentecostals. And these chaplains sometimes saw our Episcopal liturgies as uptight and too conservative. An interesting twist of irony is that many churches that abhor structure in liturgy hold fast to conservative structures politically. And these chaplains challenged me to preach, not in my normal Anglican delivery style, not in typical 15 minute Episcopal fashion. They wanted me to PREACH, be slain in the spirit, preach the word, the good news, and let the river of righteousness flow forth from my tongue. They wanted fire in my belly and brimstone in my heart, for at least 30 minutes. And this morning, my brothers and sisters, I would like to share with you a very abridged version of that sermon.

But before I begin, I must explain one difference of the more lyrical and Pan Pentecostal, Baptist sermon. In those, a preacher needs props. Two of the most famous are a floppy bible, turned carefully to appropriate pages (I only have a floppy *Book of Common Prayer*: My Bible is hardcover). And a good preacher always needs a handkerchief, which can be used both as a prop and also as a functional blotter for a sweaty, southern brow. My sermon was on the incarnation, and I began, "AND, the Lord came down from heaven. YES. He came down from Heaven to you and to me and to all of humanity. YES. And he dwelt among us. Stayed among us. Lived among us. YES. It says so in the good book. Right there in Luke. He came to save us from our sins. And his name was JESUS." And I went on and on like that, only getting more and more dramatic. And please notice that this is no plain Jesus. To say the name "Jesus" in this style of sermonizing, one must attempt to have as many syllables as possible. With four syllables, you might have a future in slain in the spirit preaching. I however, despite present performances, do not.

If you are like me, however, you might assume that such preaching meant a conservative version of Christianity, a version that is only about avoiding hell and a vengeful God. But I found that I could use the same words as many of those Pentecostal preachers as well as the same style and still have integrity. It was just that I meant something completely different than what those sermons often said. When I talked about Jesus coming down from heaven to be among us, I did not mean that he came to judge us. I meant that he came to express his love for us, to save us. The words might have been the same, but everything was different.

In this morning's Gospel reading, we hear what is known as Mark's apocalypse, Mark's revelation about the end times. And at first glance, we might think that this is the same old religious stock, Jesus claiming hellfire and damnation to all of humanity, with a righteous God shaming and slamming humanity down into the dirt. After all, Jesus says, "But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains;.... For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation."

And this morning, my brothers and sisters, I would like to talk about these words from Jesus, because these words might not mean what they first appear to mean. They, like my sermon, might connote and denote something completely different. And so, I want to explore this possibility by asking what that "desolating sacrilege" even is and question where that sacrilege ought to be so that we can know where it ought not to be. And I want to know what we as the reader should understand. Only then, can we fully understand if Jesus is a preacher in the slain in the spirit tradition or the man of peace and open arms that I believe him to be.

We must begin with the reading from the book of Daniel. In that passage, we heard about another desolating sacrilege, simply referred to as "the abomination that desolates". And we hear that it is "the end of the world as we know it," to quote the group REM, when the regular burnt offering is taken away and the abomination is set up instead. Now, you realize, I have made the matter worse. In addition to defining the abomination and desolating sacrilege, we must also define what the regular burnt offering is. But I know that the regular burnt offering refers to the Temple in Jerusalem. In the Temple of Jerusalem, live animals were sacrificed, offered to God for appeasement and atonement for sins. This burnt offering supposedly connected us to God. And failure to offer the sacrifices could result in divine wrath. And for Daniel, the abomination occurred when a sacrifice in the Temple was made to a pagan God instead of the God of Israel. An animal was killed not for the Lord but a lower case "g" god. And from what we know, this very thing happened in the time of Daniel, and Daniel believed that God would come with vengeance and punish the offenders. The abomination would be vanquished.

Jesus uses similar words as Daniel, almost the exact diction with a similar delivery. But with Jesus, these similar words mean something different than what Daniel implied, at least as Mark tells it. According to Jesus, God does not desire our offering of a sacrifice in the Temple. For Jesus tells us with his words and ultimately his life that God instead invites us to make a sacrifice not of goats but of ourselves. We are invited to share our lives and talents and possessions for the betterment of the world. And any other sacrifice than love is simply a desolating sacrilege. So, Jesus refers to something completely different than Daniel. What was once thought to be central to God, sacrifice in the Temple, is now revealed to be anathema. God only wants, like us, to be loved.

But what about having that desolating sacrilege appear where it ought not to be? This is more difficult. And this gets to the root of why God does not desire sacrifice. The Temple in Jesus' and Daniel's time used sacrifice as a way of ordering society, appeasing God. Sacrifices were understood to make us at one with God. This was atonement or at-one-ment. But in the end, Jesus saw this for what it was, violence, maybe violence aimed at something noble, but violence

nonetheless. Jesus understand that many of us attempt to control our lives through violence: whether it is through violent actions, words, or subtle attempts to control a seemingly uncontrollable universe. And he knew that if the state sanctions violence, such as sacrifice, then that violence will become infectious. Sacrifice in the Temple could become a means to the sacrificing of others, and enmity of all. And so Jesus warns the disciples that this desolating sacrilege will create the possibility for humanity to spiral out of control, that it will spill over, even outside of the Temple. And this is NOT because our God will punish us, but because humanity could punish itself.

So, let the reader understand. This world, whether we do it explicitly in a Temple or not, often sacrifices some for the sake of others. Whether we sacrifice a goat for our sins, or the rights of some to appease others, we sometimes believe that this is the only way to order ourselves. We blame crime on illegal immigrants, the difficulties of marriage on gays and lesbians, and all the problems of the world are lobbed onto people of darker skin tone than I and of different religions. We have all blamed someone at some point for our own problems. And sometimes we attempt to sacrifice those scapegoats because we think it will bring order to our lives. But like the atomic bomb that sacrificed some for the sake of a false peace only to result in nuclear proliferation, sacrificial thinking will only eventually exacerbate the problem. To solve the problem, we need the person of Jesus. We need the person who instead of sacrificing the disciples who will betray him, or punishing those who walk away, knowingly breaks bread with them, shares with them, and ultimately gives of himself for them and for us. This is what the reader must understand. If we continue to solve our problems sacrificially or violently, then we will most likely be fleeing for the hills. But if we confront the problems of our lives and our world with the peace of God. If we trust in that peace as more life giving than control, we can help solve those problems. And we will have avoided the catastrophe of a man-made, not God made apocalypse. We will have ushered in the kingdom of God. During this week Thanksgiving, I am thankful for that opportunity and pray that we will live into that hope.