As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his 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.”

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs. “But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.”

I didn’t choose this scripture passage for today, this is part of our narrative lectionary series working our way through Mark’s Gospel. But wow, it’s a doozy! On this 5th Sunday in Lent, a week before Palm Sunday, this is actually a pretty typical passage that comes our way, and usually we do some kind of theological fancy footwork to lessen its impact with the tremendous shock value it delivers. But today these words hit us squarely between the eyes. I don’t think I’ve ever quite felt their impact like this before. Not having lived through a Pandemic before can do that, I guess.

They say change happens quickly, but adaptation takes time. Psychologically adjusting to change is not instantaneous. Feeling like we’ve lost our bearings in unfamiliar territory is very much part of what is going on with all of us. Even though our homes haven’t changed, and with Spring still on the way, we are unsettled about the change occurring underneath our feet. When we are already in the midst of change, it’s very difficult to envision something new.
Times of transition like this don’t happen often; in some ways they are like that moment when a flying trapeze artist has just let go of one bar and has not yet grabbed onto the next bar; suspended in mid-flight, living in mid-air. Can you envision that? In this time of discombobulating social distancing, we don’t know what’s next. We’re anxious, antsy, and unready to welcome anything new. We want the familiar. Feeling cooped up and socially distanced is not natural; but maybe, just maybe, there is something for us to learn in this time.

Some spiritual teachers have as their mantra the words: “Don’t hurry to a new security.”

That is, there is untapped potential in the process of floundering.

Part of the problem seems to be that when we are in the midst of transition, we can’t envision the new. So we have to take T.S. Eliot’s difficult advice.

“I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope. For hope would be hope for the wrong thing.” (“East Coker”, in Four Quartets)

... Again, “Don’t hurry to a new security.”

In the normal busyness of life we seldom take the time to deepen our vision. In these in-between times, awkward as they are, we have the opportunity to rediscover that we are more than just what is happening to us. We are more than our day to day lives. Our souls are not just related to our everyday living, but also to the order God has built into all of our seasons of life together.

When the walls come tumbling down in our lives, which can happen in all sorts of ways, it’s reassuring to know that we rely on someone stronger than just ourselves alone. As the famous quote goes, “No one is an island.” It might be trivial to relate this Covid-19 outbreak to having a broken bone or a bout with the flu, but on an individual level, we might have had a similar experience of injury, readjustment and recovery, living into a new way of doing things. The unexpectedness of the change is a shock to the system; disruptive and disturbing.

Our Gospel lesson shares unexpected words from Jesus to the disciples; he throws them for a loop and turns their worlds upside down.
As Mark sets the scene, Jesus stands in the temple courtyard. One of the disciples, dazzled by the architectural majesty surrounding them, speaks to Jesus: “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!”

According to Josephus, a 1st century historian, the Jerusalem temple of Jesus's day was an awe-inspiring wonder. Newly rebuilt by Herod the Great, the temple's walls were made of stones forty feet long. The temple's base itself was twice as large as the Roman Forum and four times as large as the Athenian Acropolis.

King Herod reportedly used so much gold to cover the temple walls that anyone who gazed at them in bright sunlight risked blinding themselves. Appropriately enough, the disciple in the story is impressed and tries to share his awe with Jesus.

But Jesus isn’t blinded or even dazzled. Instead, he responds with a direct question: “Do you see these great buildings?”

Now, why does Jesus ask the disciple if he can see what the disciple has just invited Jesus to see? Aren’t the two of them looking at the same thing? Well, no. They’re not. They’re not seeing the same thing at all.

What the disciple sees is an architectural marvel; it’s also the biggest, most unshakeable symbol of God’s presence he’s able to imagine. For him, the massive stones hold religious memory. They symbolize Israel’s identity. They are a symbol of spiritual glory, honor, and purpose. In short, what takes the disciple’s breath away is the religious prowess and permanence those glittering stones show to the world. 

That’s what the disciple sees. But what does Jesus see? He sees ruin, destruction, rubble. The temple will not last. There will be loss, not glory. “Not one stone will be left upon another,” Jesus tells the stunned disciples. “All will come down.”

This passage from Mark’s Gospel is often categorized as apocalyptic. If you’re like me, your cultural references for “apocalypse” include war movies like “Apocalypse Now”, some images of the “Left Behind” fiction series from some years back, and the Book of Revelation. When I hear the word, I
conjure up images of vacant-eyed zombies lurching through decimated neighborhoods; not a very pleasant scene, for sure.

But in fact, “apocalypse” means something very different. An apocalypse is an unveiling; a revealing; an uncovering, a disclosure of something secret, hidden; the curtain being raised on the stage. To experience an apocalypse is to experience fresh sight and renewed vision; it is to understand life as we’ve never known it before.

In this sense, Jesus offers his disciples a new vision. He invites them to look beyond the grandeur of the temple and recognize that God will not be limited to a building, ANY building, even the temple. The temple is not the epicenter of God’s work; God is not bound by stone and mortar.

No building, no institution, no mission statement, no strategic plan can contain or limit God. God cannot be enslaved in superlatives. We’re the ones all too easily seduced by the biggest, the newest, and the shiniest. “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!”

Neither this gospel passage or any other in Mark records the disciples’ response to Jesus’ words. Most likely, they simply didn’t get it.

They were dumbstruck at what he was telling them. Similarly, we are pretty well dumbstruck by the recent events that have befallen us.

This virus has come upon us, some would say ‘as a thief in the night’, putting it Biblically. And similarly all kinds of ‘false prophets’ have arrived to try to lead us astray, to draw our attention away from what the Gospel calls us to do.

I have to confess that these times have been a bit unsettling for me, too. I’ve seen a few empty shelves in some grocery stores and have stood far apart in line, waiting to get in. I’ve been disoriented and preoccupied; I’ve misplaced my wallet three times this past week, with my head swimming with so many things going around.

Taking note that the upcoming Adult Seminar series will be reading from Barbara Brown Taylor, I had a look back at one of her earlier books, a sermon collection from 1998, titled God in Pain. Her first sermon, drawing coincidentally from this passage of scripture, argues that ‘disillusionment’ is essential to the Christian life. “Disillusionment” she says, is the loss of an illusion — about ourselves, about the world, about God — and while it is almost always a painful thing, it is never a bad thing, to have our
lives be redirected to the ways God would have us live. It is change, it is what we’re experiencing now, like it or not.

Jesus came among his followers to show how to live when the walls come tumbling down. Instead of inciting hysteria, Jesus embodied calm strength and generous love in the face darkening clouds. “Don’t be alarmed,” he says, when truth is shaken, and plagues strike, and imposters preach gospels of fear and hatred. Don’t give in to terror. Don’t despair. Don’t capitalize on chaos. God doesn’t incite suspicion. God does not instill dread.

In these troubling days it’s easy to despair, or grow numb, or let exhaustion overwhelm us. But it’s precisely now, when things may feel eerily apocalyptic, that it’s time to respond with resilient, healing love. These words of Jesus bring hope to me because we are each and every one of us told to stay awake. This means that it is not just one or two of us who are told to be ready, we are all told to be ready.

As my preaching buddy friend, Debbie McKinley puts it: the question now isn’t if this an apocalypse, the question is... are we awake?

Are we watching for the buds of the trees, the new life growing right under our feet? Are we tending the kingdom of heaven; the seeds of faith, are we connecting and growing?

Are we loving God and taking care of each other? Are we living life like it is short and precious, are we treating each other like sisters and brothers? Are we grounding ourselves in God’s living word?

“Never wish a moment away”- even this one. God is with us and among us always.

Like a flying trapeze artist; God is always there to catch you as you reach to others. Just give it a try & see.

Thanks be to God. Amen.