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The Foundation of Hope

Hebrews 10:11-25

Mark 13:1-8

Introduction to Hebrews: The Letter of Hebrews – and the passage we read today – assumes that we are familiar with the ancient Jewish practice of worshiping God by bringing sacrifices to the Jerusalem Temple. The Old Testament outlines many different types of sacrifices that were to be made both to ask for God’s forgiveness and to show thanks. And the priests in the Jerusalem Temple offered the sacrifices on behalf of the people every day. The writer of Hebrews contrasts these daily and non-stop sacrifices with the once-and-for-all, completely effective sacrifice of Christ. It is only that sacrifice, says Hebrews, that never needs to be repeated. It is Christ’s act on our behalf that – alone – makes it possible for us to be reconciled with a Holy God.

On September 10, 2001, hundreds of thousands of Americans went about their day as they always did. And, looking up at the twin Trade Center buildings in New York City, one could not help but be impressed. But the very next day, there was barely a stone left on top of a stone, and all was thrown down.

“Look, Teacher, what larges stones and what large buildings!” Jesus’ disciples said of the Temple in Jerusalem. It certainly looked permanent and powerful and substantial and safe.

The disciples could not imagine a time when the Jerusalem Temple would be no more, and they were impressed and awed by its size and solidity. Before September 11, 2001, we could not imagine a time when terrorists could level the World Trade Center buildings. But it happened – both in Jerusalem and in New York. And we were shaken and disoriented and afraid.

Immediately following 9/11, sanctuaries were full to overflowing with folks looking for comfort and direction. But the long term effect has not been to increase reliance on God. In fact, overall American church attendance - across all sorts of types of Christian Churches – is at an all-time low in our nation. Life seems harder. We feel more stretched. It is hard to know who or what is trustworthy, and when we are tired, stretched and disillusioned it is just easier not to go to worship where little is given and less is required of us except to sit still.

Evil seems alive and well in our world and even in the church and in ourselves. So, what good is faith? If God was real, wouldn't Christians be better people? If our sacrifices made any difference wouldn't God come down and save us from the evil that seems so close? If my attendance in worship made any difference, then why did my cancer return, my child kill himself, why was my job was downsized, why did my spouse have an affair?

What really is my basis for hope?

To that question, today's scriptures offer an unequivocal answer: The only unshakable, unfailing hope is in God alone. "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful." (Heb 10:23)

Human beings have – from the beginning of time and throughout Scripture – always been impressed by and taken comfort in the wrong things. The Jews thought that as long as the Jerusalem Temple stood that it meant that God lived in their midst and they were immune to suffering and evil. We are no different. We look at our institutions, and even our country and are comforted by the size, the magnificence, the wealth, the beauty, and we are awestruck and impressed. Take whatever symbol of national greatness that impresses us most – any symbol – and let us spend a moment listening to what Jesus says. "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

Very disconcerting. Jesus cautions us. Do not take comfort in or build your hope on the foundation of any impressive structure, even the Jerusalem Temple. Mark's Gospel tells us that it was later that day, after Jesus and the Disciples had left Jerusalem and were sitting opposite the Temple on the Mount of Olives, that Peter, James, John and Andrew came to Jesus to ask him a question privately. "Tell us, when will the Temple be thrown down? How will we know when this is about to happen?" Scripture doesn't say it, but I bet that they also said, "Just tell us. We promise we won't tell anyone else. It will be our little secret. Strictly confidential."

When the outer structures and institutions of our hope fall, we turn to our next favorite source of security: being right, being in the know, being on the inside circle of the best information. If the Temple was going to fall down, the Disciples reckoned, they would stick close to Jesus who – they believe – was the Messiah. That way at least they had a chance of knowing what was going to happen when.

Scripture holds up a mirror to us today and challenges our most dearly held idolatries. It is not the heft of our national symbols of security, nor is it our ability to be right, to be good, or to understand what is happening that provides a foundation for life and hope and salvation.

The foundation of our hope, our life and our salvation is only the faithfulness of God – present and given to us in the person of Jesus Christ. God alone is faithful. God alone is the foundation of our hope.

If our hope is in the Temple, but the Temple falls and we lose hope, then it is clear that we have built our hope on the wrong foundation.

If our hope is in our strength and the doctors' abilities, but our cancer comes back and we lose hope, then it is clear that we have built our hope on the wrong foundation.

If our hope is in the reliability of another person, but our marriage fails, a politician lies, a preacher is a fraud or a trusted person abuses us and we lose hope, then it is clear that we have built our hope on the wrong foundation.

If our hope is in our own ability to succeed, to do right, to be holy and kind and true, but we sin every single day and over and over again fail to do what we know is right and our hope fails, then it is clear that we have built our hope on the wrong foundation.

This week, I was watching on TV the coverage of the wildfire in Paradise, California. And the reporter was talking to a survivor who had been trying to flee the fire in her car. She said that she was driving and trying to get away from the fire, but when the paint on her car began to bubble up and she felt the tires begin to melt, she called her husband on her cell phone and said to him, "I am going to die right here. I am going to die." And she said that her husband said to her, "Don't die! Get out of the car and just run. Don't die!" She said she got out of her car and began to run, and as she ran a fire fighter came out of the smoke and wrapped her in a fire blanket and carried her to the cab of a waiting fire truck. She did not die.

She did not die because the firefighter walked into the fire and covered her with a protection that did not belong to her, and carried her to the cab of a waiting fire truck. She was not saved because she was good. She was not saved because she was wealthy. She was not saved because she promised never to get close to a fire again. She was not saved because of what she offered to the fire fighter. She was saved because that is what the fire fighter was there to do and she accepted his offer. It was grace. It was a gift. It was not something that she could have done for herself.

It seems impossible to imagine that every stone could be thrown down, but even that time could come. The Temple or symbols of our national power are not the foundation of our hope.

And we are not able to save ourselves by being holy enough. We will continue – every one of us – to do what we know is wrong, say things that hurt others, make our security and comfort a priority over the needs of others. We will continue to sin and fall short. And we will also continue to lack understanding. We may tell others that we know, that we are certain, or that we have the inside scoop. But that says more about our need to be right, certain and strong than it does about reality.

And if the Temple falls, and the preacher is a disappointment, and the cancer comes back, and dementia takes our memory, and suicide or addiction takes a loved one, and when we do not understand, Scripture says that none of that was ever going to be the foundation of our eternal hope anyway.

The only basis of eternal hope is that God will come to us – as we run away from the smoking ruins of what we had believed would save us – and wrap us in a blanket and carry us – flaws and all – to a place where the foundations of hope and faith are unshakable. We can't know when. We will not understand it all. But we can be certain that the God who loves us and has promised not to leave us alone is faithful. Mark and Hebrews remind us that the best we can do is welcome the savior and accept help instead of running right by and pretending to be able to save ourselves.

So, provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see [that] Day approaching.” (Heb 10:24-25)