

Mark 13:1-8

Pentecost 25

St Mark – November 14, 2021

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## **We are the Church**

In memory of Ellen Smith

I was blessed several weeks ago by a long conversation with our newly elected Bishop Coadjutor, The Reverend Matthew Cowden. Our conversation touched on many things, but at one point we talked of death. We had both recently been through the death of someone close to us.

We talked of loss, we talked of the struggle and pain that so often comes with leaving this life. He told me that it seemed somehow fitting to him since there is also pain and struggle as we enter this life. He quickly added with a chuckle that he may not feel it is so fitting when his own passing from this life to the next comes along. But our soon-to-be-Bishop's words echo a bit of what Jesus told a few of his apostles in this morning's reading. The pain and hardship of this life "is but the beginning of the birthpangs."

Ellen certainly knew pain and she struggled greatly in the last years of her life. Ellen also knew laughter, love, childish delight, and Ellen knew that she was God's own, that Jesus loved her. She held fast to the example of the life that was to come, her life that was ahead, life that was beyond pain and suffering, the example of which was set forth by our Lord's Resurrection. The example of his broken body being restored to perfection.

Our gospel reading this morning talks of the disciples' wonder at the magnificence of the temple in Jerusalem. They have finally arrived at the destination Jesus has been moving them toward, told about in our readings for many weeks. He has told them three times that this place, Jerusalem, is to be the place of his death and that his death will be excruciating. In each of those 'tellings' he has said that the grave will not hold him, that he will rise from the grave and we know that he did.

Ellen knew that too and she held fast to the knowledge of his glorious resurrection.

As his disciples marvel at the size and grandeur of the temple, Jesus tells them that all of it will be destroyed, that none of it will not outlast time. It is a building made by man, a temple of human making. Jesus reminds us that we are God's creation and there is nothing finer. Jesus is telling us that it is not the things we

create, buildings and such, but what God has created in each of us that is truly holy. This building isn't the Church. The Church is all of us, together. We are the bride of Christ. We are the Church. We are Christ's own.

Peter, John, James, and Andrew ask when the temple will be destroyed and what signs will warn them when the terrible destruction is about to take place. Jesus answers neither of their questions. Instead he tells them to be careful, to rest their faith on hope, to worry not about the sometimes terrible, but still routine hardships of life on earth. He tells them to be careful of those who will try to lead them astray.

Josephus, a first century Jewish historian, reports of many first century pretenders and in our own time many come to mind. Pretenders such as Jim Jones, who in 1978 lead more than 900 souls to their death when they followed him. The list of those 'religious leaders' who would lead us astray goes on and is joined by those who purport to answer our longing for meaning and salvation in superficial ways. Some, and of course not all, but some politicians, beauty consultants, and motivational speakers are just a few of those.

Jesus goes on to name some of the widespread terrors that impact our existence: wars earthquakes, floods, famines, and endless strife. He tells us not to worry. He reminds us that just as there is great pain in human birth, the joy that accompanies the arrival of the child is greater. Focus on the joy to come and know that the terrors of this life are fleeting while the joy that is to come, the life we are heading toward, will erase the memory of that fleeting terror.

The infant child that comes out of the pain of childbirth brings joy beyond measure.

Having shared with Ellen many hours that became weeks, turned into months, and stretched on to become years of increased strife, I sometimes struggle with the idea that the horrors of this life are fleeting and at the same time I am greatly comforted by knowing that, in fact, they are.

John quotes Jesus saying,

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.”

Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

Jesus said to him,

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Ellen and I shared the Eucharist together each week when she wasn't able to attend services. We shared the readings appointed for each Sunday and discussed the gospel, sometimes at length. As what was to become her last season of Lent approached we talked about why we omit the word “Alleluia” in the penitential season of Lent. And then we decided to rebel! We decided that we would say “Alleluia” throughout Lent! Each of those weeks in Lent we took childish delight and relished in our rebellion. Our smiles were even more exuberant than normal as we joyfully said our Alleluias.

I give thanks to God for our rebellion. I'm thankful that Ellen never lost sight of the thankful rejoicing brought to mind as we loudly proclaimed Alleluia! each week.

Ellen's hope and in her final days, her longing for death that became the focus of her prayers was in our Lord's Resurrection and the newness of life that was to be hers at any moment.

C.S. Lewis talked of our life on earth as being like a Shadowland. A place where although we are most certainly God's own we are in a fallen state, fallen because of our sin.

He wrote that in this life, in this Shadowland, we only experience the Glory of God, glory that includes goodness, love, and mercy, in a limited way. He held that it would only be when we passed from death to life eternal that we would experience the full Glory of our Lord, the Three in One.

May we all hold fast to the promise of life eternal.

We give thanks to God for taking our sister Ellen from this Shadowland and imagine with child-like wonder the Glory she now knows in life eternal.