

Sermon – Mark 13:1-8
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Grace Lutheran Church
26 Pentecost – Year B
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“The Bigger the Stone”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Outside of eating haggis, frequenting the pubs, and studying theology and philosophy, there wasn't really all that much to do in St. Andrews. I was living in Scotland for a year after completing seminary, both ready and not quite ready to enter into ordained ministry. Without much to do other than the aforementioned activities, which to tell the truth took up most of my time, I developed an affinity for simply taking walks. Of course, other than walking to get haggis, to go to a pub, or to visit the library, there weren't that many places to walk. My friends who loved golf would walk to the Old Course, nestled in the shadow of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club, where the sport, perhaps, was invented. My friends who loved movies, or perhaps 1980s synthesized soundtracks, would walk on West Sands Beach, where the immortal running scenes from *Chariots of Fire* were filmed. But I love churches, and so I would walk to the other end of town, to St. Andrews Cathedral. Construction on the cathedral began in 1158, and it took 160 years to build. When it was done, it became the largest church to ever stand in Scotland. Approaching the church from the west, one walks up to and through an impressive main gate. And on the other side? Nothing but open sky and, since it's Scotland, a bit of rain more often than not. Oh, the east gable remains, as does some of the south transept wall. But other than that it's fallen apart, falling victim first to the zealous Presbyterians and then to the elements. 400 years it stood, beckoning to pilgrims, home to the saints as they gathered for mass. And now? Barely one stone left upon another. The

- sturdiest stones that remain are those that mark the graves north of what's left of the nave.
2. The cathedral must have seemed so permanent. Such things usually do. What large stones and what large buildings and all that. So it was for the disciples. They were on the trip of a lifetime, visiting Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Coming out of the Temple, they marvel at its solidity, its sheer physicality pointing to the incandescent presence of the divine who dwelled therein. For centuries the people had come to make sacrifice to the God who made and kept covenant with them. They believed that place, stone upon stone, would be the center of the covenant peoples' future just as it had been the center of their past. *This* is where God was, and *this* was how God wanted things – a world put to rights with the Temple shining as a beacon in the center of it all. What a vision!
 3. A vision, yes, but not what God actually has in store. Jesus hadn't read Yeats or Chinua Achebe, but he knew that things fall apart, that centers do not hold. "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." This is not the stuff of successful capital campaigns for church restoration. It is, however, both an incredibly accurate portrait of reality and an entry point into the new vision that God is unfolding through Jesus. Reality, because things *do* fall apart. See these large stones, this soaring ceiling? One day, somehow or another, in the course of this world or in the coming of the next (and through no fault of the Board of Trustees), the earth will reclaim it all. Nothing we build lasts forever, and neither do we, apart from God's grace. That's just true.
 4. But it's also true that the Jerusalem Temple was not simply another building, grand one day and gone the next. There would continue to be a Temple at the center of God's project to put the world, heaven and earth, back together. But it would not be the old, or even a new, Temple made of stone and altar. It

would be, it is, the new Temple that is no one and nothing other than Jesus Christ. He is priest and sacrifice, the shining indwelling of God that will no longer be contained behind curtains. The Temple is not simply gone; it is knocked down and resurrected in the person of Jesus. In him, in Christ, the truth of reality is turned on its head. For where once everything fell apart, now in Jesus will everything that has fallen apart, been knocked over, died – well, all of that will be raised up, built back up, *resurrected* in a whole new world.

5. Of course, things still fall apart. If you want evidence, turn on the news or open a window. Wars and rumors of war. Famine and earthquakes. Fires that rage through California. So has it always been. So are the birth pangs that lead from this reality to the next. Birth pangs. A wonderful image, although of course that's easy for me to say! Erika might have other opinions. But after the pangs comes the birth. A newness of life in which recent pains are not so much erased as they are overwhelmed by joy. In the midst of the pangs, the things we work so hard to maintain will fall apart regardless. So it goes. But as the old falls apart, so does the old Temple, precisely so that a new Temple can take its place. Its name is Jesus, and he's already been knocked down. It won't happen again.

6. So what are we to do, we who gather here in this beautiful building that won't last forever? Maybe we think from time to time that it's not what it used to be, back in the days when it was full, or so I hear. Then again, perhaps we've put too much trust in the old things sometimes, and not enough faith in the new things that God's Spirit is busy getting up to. So we start by taking care of this place, its stone and, even more, its people. We care for its physicality because we need a place to safely gather, a place in which we can hear that all such places will fall apart but that God's grace will hold. We care for one another because we need people to cling to as the falling apart happens; people to work with to build it back up. We listen to voices like that

of the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews: “Hold fast,” we hear, “to the confession of our hope.” Don’t waver, for the One who promised is more faithful than these stones. Provoke one another to love and good deeds. And keep meeting together, you who are the church, you who are the resurrected Body of Christ let loose in this world, you who will not be bound by stone or wall, you who are the very building blocks with which God is building a new heaven and a new earth. And we are sent. Our mission statement doesn’t simply say that we bring in and build up. It reminds us that once we are built up, we are sent out. Out to be living bricks and mortar in a world that needs Jesus and that hope he has to offer. This work might not look much like the church of our past, but it is the church of the Spirit’s future – and it is happening in countless surprising places outside the walls of this or any building.

7. Sure, the whole thing is falling apart. But also, the whole thing is already rebuilt. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. That much is true. So what do we do today? We build up. We build up this place, this people. When it falls apart, we build it again. We build together so that we can face all of life’s falling apartness together. We join together so that we can point out to each other the Kingdom being built upon that rejected cornerstone. We rejoice at the new members of this church, joining today the fellowship we share, living building blocks for God’s kingdom. We are together because that is where God has placed us. Together in Christ. It’s amazing to gather in such a place, even if it won’t last. But we will, for we have been raised with Christ.

8. Every time I walked up to and through the west gate of St. Andrews Cathedral, I wondered at how a visitor from centuries ago would experience the place today. Where’d it all go, they’d ask? This place into which we placed ourselves, our time; from which we received grace upon grace? But then I’d smile. For God and the elements and even the Presbyterians had really

improved upon the whole enterprise. Sure, a bit of rain got in. Some wind, too. But without those walls and that ceiling, it was surprisingly easy to look up and glimpse the Kingdom rising among the ruins. So yeah, the ceiling will fall in one day. So it goes. But that's how the Kingdom breaks in. And when it happens, even the sturdy gravestones will give way as we rise to the eternal newness of life Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.