

The Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Proper 28  
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD  
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL  
November 14, 2021  
Daniel 12:1-3  
Psalm 16  
Hebrews 10:11-14, (15-18), 19-25  
Mark 13:1-8

## No Going Back

A week ago last Friday, in the November 4 issue of *The Epistle*, I wrote about the rise of what was known as St Martin's Lent, a season of preparation and fasting for the forty-three days leading up till Christmas. It was called St Martin's Lent because it began the day after the feast day of St Martin of Tours on November 11. So, if still observed, today would be the first Sunday of Advent.

This longer Advent season of six Sundays was the practice of the Church in the West for centuries. It was quite widespread by the Middle Ages. Years later the season of Advent was shortened to the four Sundays before Christmas.

In the last few decades, with the restoration of what we call the Revised Common Lectionary, we have returned to the lectionary readings that were part of that longer Advent. We can hear Advent themes of end times and the culmination of history especially in the readings from Daniel and Mark. These readings have the tone and timbre of the apocalyptic.

And, truth be told, most of the New Testament has a flavor of the apocalyptic. The communities and individuals who composed the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were oriented around the imminent return of Christ. They composed in an apocalyptic register. They were waiting for that revelation, that disclosure that would bring time to an end and history to a close.

They were much more interested in Christ's second coming than in celebrating his first Advent, his birth. Apocalypse, meaning revelation, of things hidden, yes. They were about that. *Parousia*—the return of the victorious Christ coming alongside, yes. They were about that as well. Christmas, not so much. This was true for the first 300 years of church history. Indeed, the first recorded celebration of Christmas, the feast of the Incarnation, was not until the year 336 CE. Three hundred years without Christmas and with eager anticipation of the second advent of Christ.

Our gospel from Mark resonates with this focus on something reaching culmination and a climactic ending. It presages the demise of something long established.

Like last week, our gospel today takes place during Holy Week, the days between Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his execution. Every day of this week, Jesus and his core group of male disciples walk into Jerusalem the mile and a half from the village of Bethany

to the temple. Each evening, until Thursday night, they walk back to Bethany to spend the night.

They're leaving the temple in our gospel today, going across to sit on the Mount of Olives to behold the temple's beauty, the 40 acres of the temple mount.

In response to a disciple's remark about how large, how substantial the stones and the buildings of the temple are, Jesus predicts that they will all be knocked down.

He predicts the destruction of the temple and the temple system.

He is right. Not too many years after Jesus' earthly life concludes, in the year 70 CE, that temple, the second temple in Jerusalem, would be destroyed. And the system would be brought down with it.

It might be nice to think that these stories are only a critique of the religious practices of a people long ago in a faraway place.

The reality, however, is that we are also entangled in systems that no longer work as intended, that are calcified and ineffective, that need to be overhauled and renovated, literally, made new.

Some of those systems are in our wider society. Some of those systems are within our beloved Church.

The protracted COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated some changes, for sure. It has also revealed a number of systems that haven't worked well for some time and has accelerated the pace of our need to address them.

As organizational psychologist Adam Grant has recently put it, as the pandemic recedes, we can see that many of our so-called "best practices" were designed for a world that no longer exists. In the face of change, he says, the routines that once moved us forward can become ruts that hold us back.

From what we count each week, month, and year to what we submit in annual parochial reports, we can see that we are in many cases using old models, old systems that are no longer quite as effective as they once were and that may soon, like the temple of Jerusalem, fall in upon themselves.

For example, we have an eighteenth-century model of membership. Is it time maybe to think about revising it somehow? The specific case of St Paul's, where many people faithfully attend for the portion of the year that they spend in Key West but attend elsewhere half the year or more, raises the question of what exactly is meant by membership in the Episcopal

branch of the Jesus Movement and, specifically, in the southernmost Episcopal parish in the continental US.

We are entering a new era. As we emerge from this pandemic of twenty months and counting, the opportunities for innovation and positive change—for reimagining—that we have right now are unlikely to come around again in such a way in most, if not all, of our lifetimes.

Given these changes, realities, and these changing realities, how should we respond? What should we prioritize? What systems should we overhaul or even replace?

In addition to the attendance at services and the amount of money given, what else should we be measuring? What about levels of engagement among the members of St Paul's in ministry within the congregation and in the wider community? How about the total number of ministry touches, all the encounters each of us has each week in the name of Christ? What else? What are the most appropriate metrics in our current context? What are the wisest approaches to staffing? How can we amplify our presence in the community? And what is the community asking of us?

These are issues not only for us but also for our diocese of Southeast Florida, for the entire Episcopal Church and, indeed, for the whole Church, capital "C." Christ will come again; the 1950s will not.

As Jesus reminds us, there is no structure, whether external or internal, that will last forever. All structures, all human creations, will eventually meet their demise. We often experience great strife within ourselves and among ourselves when things we have long loved are in transition.

What happened to Judaism after the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed? It was the end of the temple system. But it was not the end of Judaism.

Because, centuries before Jesus, during a prolonged period of exile in Babylon, far away from the promised land and after the destruction of the first temple in Jerusalem, Solomon's temple, the children of Israel adapted and innovated. They kept both themselves and the heart of their traditions and practices alive. They modified and made new structures.

During the Babylonian captivity, 70 years away from their homeland, they experienced the beginnings of what would become the synagogue movement. They couldn't sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem, but they could study where they were. They could still love God and neighbor. They could still be Jews. They found new ways to do so.

They brought this synagogue modification back with them when they were allowed to return to Palestine. They rebuilt the temple, and they built synagogues. Think of all the times we

have heard about Jesus was in the temple. Think of all the times we have heard that Jesus, on the sabbath day, went to synagogue as was his custom. Judaism had both until the second temple was destroyed in 70 CE.

And after the temple was destroyed a second time, the synagogue movement, a newer system, continued. Study replaced sacrifice. Judaism did not die but was transformed.

So, too, it will be for us. Some of the systems and structures of our beloved Episcopal Church will go away in the coming years. A few of them already have. That will not be the end of the Episcopal Church; it will hasten the advent of new forms of congregational life and mission. We are already experiencing these some of these new forms of life and flourishing. There is no going back. There is only going forward. Forward together into God's unfolding future.

Some of our models and methods will collapse like the second temple in Jerusalem. But our mission and this movement inaugurated by Jesus the Christ will continue. Methods and models may pass away; mission and movement will continue, perhaps in some forms we cannot even imagine right now.

This in-between time is challenging, but, if we love God more than we love our models and more than we love "the way things have always been," more than we love "the way things used to be;" if we love God more than these, we will find our way through to new life. We are people of the Resurrection. Always there is life, death, and new life.

In 2,000 years, despite how many times we collectively as the Church have gotten things wrong, messed things up, and mixed things up, we have still not managed to kill the Jesus Movement. Somebody say, "Amen." So, be of good cheer. There are exciting new journeys ahead. I find it amazing and wonderful that God has chosen to place us, here, together, now. I give great thanks for that.

There is turbulence in the near term. It is uncomfortable. None of us has been here before. So, let's be patient with each other and kind to one another.

And let's take a page from the Epistle to the Hebrews, our second reading: continuing in the new and living way Jesus has opened for us; approaching God with true hearts in full assurance of faith, of trust, of interdependence; holding fast to the confession of our hope because God is faithful, trustworthy, reliable; considering how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, gathering together, and encouraging one another.

We're already on the way. If you're gonna keep going, say, "Amen."