

The phrase that struck me when I was reading the Gospel for today is when one of the disciples says, “Look, teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” It took me right back to the time I was in Jerusalem in 2015 on my last sabbatical. It was so quiet and peaceful in the early morning sunlight.

We had been told that we would have no formal tours of the Jerusalem Temple, now called the Dome of the Rock, because of increased tensions between Muslims and Jews. It’s so confusing and complicated. I won’t get into what was going on at that time and who had insulted or attacked whom. All parties bore some of the responsibility of that tense time. This was just one of many, many tense times in the Old City of Jerusalem.

We found out from someone at the Cathedral that if we ditch our group (briefly) and just a very few of us went up early in the morning they might let us in. After all, we were just American tourists and certainly not involved in all the current unrest. We awoke before dawn, gathered in the early light outside of the Cathedral and walked through the Old City to the checkpoint.

It was 7 AM when we presented ourselves to the Muslim and Jewish authorities near the base of the Western Wall, saying, in truth, that we were Christian pilgrims, with no interest in the politics of the moment and just wanted to have a chance to see the Temple. And after carefully examining our documents, they let the four of us through.

How gorgeous that site was in the early morning light! How quiet and devoid of tourists or combatants or anyone it was! We were left to use our eyes, ears, cameras and Biblical remembrances to try to record in our memory banks for all time, “What large stones and what large buildings!”

Surely, we thought, they will be there forever. The stones at our feet were smooth from centuries of people walking on them. You can see from the picture on your bulletin. I wondered, when were those particular stones laid? There was no guide there to tell us the history of this one spot. We had to use our holy imaginations and our memories of the history we had read.

Were these stones laid at the time when the first or second Temples were completed. Or perhaps, and more likely, at the time of the major remodel done by King Herod about 20 years before the birth of Christ. That would mean that people had been treading this walkway for only about 2000 years.

What you feel when you are there is permanence, immense and immovable grandeur. This, surely, will last forever! These are massive rocks and buildings. They have outlived 50 or more generations of faithful people, Jews, Christians and Muslims. God willing, they will survive many more.

And yet, Jesus makes a very important point to his disciples...this too will be thrown down. Nothing that humans can construct is certain to last forever. And in fact, we know that the Temple itself was

destroyed by the Romans in the year 70. The Temple mount and most famously, the Western Wall remain.

Experts think that this Gospel of Mark was written at about that time, around the year 70 or shortly thereafter. Mark may have been writing his Gospel in the face of the siege of Jerusalem, thinking that he had the only and best chance...and maybe the last chance, to record for posterity the life, ministry, death and resurrection of the Son of God, Jesus.

Can you imagine the pressure he must have felt to set down in writing the stories of Jesus, and told by Jesus for all generations to come. Today is the last Sunday we'll hear Mark's Gospel on Sunday mornings until 2024 when the Lectionary comes back around to this, the shortest and earliest written Gospel. Mark seemed to be in a big hurry writing his testimony to the life of Jesus. He didn't have time or desire to put in a birth narrative for Jesus. He didn't place disciples waiting around at the end of his book in an upper room to discuss the future, or see the risen Christ. Mark is anxious to tell us who Jesus was and what he did from the time of his baptism until his resurrection.

Jesus himself was in a hurry in Mark's Gospel. Mark recalls that Jesus immediately did this and then immediately did that. He didn't have time for long sermons on mountains, or farewell discourses.

Jesus says that we will hear of wars and rumors of wars but that we must not be frightened by it. God has more important things for us to focus on. The fire in Millerton last Saturday is yet another case where what we think will last does not. We may not be able to stop the destruction of seemingly permanent things, but we can be part of the permanence of God's gracious loving care of all of us.

What is permanent? Love is permanent. The Holy Scripture that tells us of all the ways in which God has loved us and the ways in which we are given the grace filled gift to love one another.

God is the same, yesterday, today and tomorrow. And God's word survives all. Because we read, mark, learn and inwardly digest God's word, it is with us forever. God is who we depend on in any and every situation. That's what Jesus came to earth to tell us. The buildings might fall down. You and I might fall sick and unfortunately, leave this earthly life one day. But God keeps us together, depending on each other. God keeps us looking to help our neighbor, a sick parishioner, a family member far away, a struggling neighbor in Millerton after a fire.

What survives? Love.