

Play with children and with building blocks sometime.

It takes a lot of effort to build the blocks into a tower that falls so very quickly.

Children delight in knocking your careful handiwork to the ground and become impatient that the tower doesn't go up nearly as quickly as it comes down.

It's an important life lesson.

It takes so long to build a temple, and so little time to destroy one.

The things into which we put so much effort and care, so many hours and dollars and plans, can tumble so suddenly.

Our careful handiwork gets leveled by unsympathetic forces beyond our control.

The Romans came through in 70 AD and decimated the Jerusalem temple.

The airplanes came through in 2001 AD and leveled the American temple complex.

Europe is littered with the wreckage and rubble of countless cathedrals, often centuries in the making and seconds in the collapse.

War and disaster and disease ravage indiscriminately if not target directly the most holy places and palaces in our lives, and all that we work so hard to build crumbles so easily.

It happens on the smaller scale of our shaky lives too.

It takes so much time and work to get the job, and it gets taken away so quickly.

It takes so much effort to stay healthy, but only an eyeblink to receive the bullet or the diagnosis.

We put all we have into the partnership or the marriage only to be blindsided by a sudden death or divorce or outburst of domestic violence.

We invest so much in our little temples...the structures like family and job and body and bank account where we keep and protect what is most important and dear to us...and so quickly those structures can be ransacked and ruined by forces beyond our control.

The sacred places in our lives where we look for God are not any more protected than anything else; burglars and bulldozers hit churches too, and there is no special bulletproof or teflon protection for people of faith from the destructive madness amok in the world.

Faithfulness is no insulation or insurance against calamity; often it actually heightens the risk.

People are often shocked to hear that a church gets robbed or an usher gets shot or a priest gets murdered at the altar...but Jesus is not surprised at all.

Temples fall.

Warring kingdoms and charismatic liars rage; earthquakes and disasters happen.

They are a part of the broken and beautiful world that God loves, and calls us to love, which means exposure to danger like and with everyone else.

And Jesus tells his disciples all this with his own demise hanging thick and imminent in the air.

Even the Son of God himself is not safe.

We greet this news as the gospel, a word we often confuse as meaning truth, because truth it is, but that's not what the word *gospel* means.

Gospel means "good news," but today's troubling reading from Mark sounds much more like the 6:00 news than it does good news.

Those who seek an escape from this troubled world will be disappointed in Jesus, who calls us deeper into it.

After a laundry list of catastrophes and dangers, he says *this is but the beginning of the birth pangs*.

It's going to be awful, and then it's going to get much worse.

This is the good news of the Lord.

It really is.

Something cataclysmic and terrible and disastrous happened to me many years ago, which I believed was the end of the world.

I had my life together in a warm and wonderful home, had everything I needed, including a feeling of safety and security and peace.

Then the landlady kicked me out.

I resisted going; I lingered two weeks later than I was supposed to, and then, when the birth pangs began, when the temple began to collapse and the violence began to rage around me, I hunkered down and held on.

It took my mother 36 hours to get me through the birth canal because I had no interest whatsoever in being born.

I had it good in there; why would I want to leave?

No one could have convinced me then that the unmitigated disaster I was going through was good news.

Meanwhile, lost on the baby and probably also on those male disciples is just how painful and perilous birth pangs really are.

That was especially true when Jesus was speaking, in a time when the birth process carried a much higher risk of mortality, for mother and for child, and far less reliable options for anesthesia and sanitation.

Birth pangs feel like anything but good news to the body with the breaking womb.

And even if everything goes well--even if the baby and the mother are healthy--there is such a long time of recovery and care for the infant and then care for the child.

There is so much to do between the time of birth and the time of worth: the time that the child, who had no value in Jesus' society, grew into a valuable adult.

It takes so long for birth pangs to realize their potential as good news.

It takes so long for the tree to grow into something and no time at all to cut it down.

It takes so long to build a temple or a reputation or a life and so little for it all to crash.

But the crash itself is the beginning of the good news.

The fall of the temple means that God will have to live somewhere else...and that somewhere else is the one who sits opposite on the Mount of Olives.

In this story, God is not going to lose just one house, but two.

It is not only the old building but also the young messiah who will fall.

By the end of Mark's thirteenth chapter, the focus will shift from the downfall of the temple to the demise of the teacher, who is on his way to the cross in a harrowing scene we now dare to name good news.

Chaos and collapse, death and destruction, vitriol and violence, the perfect storm of human wreckage and ruin proves in its agony to be birth, the good news of new life emerging from what looks and feels and smells like nothing but death.

The fall of the temple named Jesus, the place where God lives, will prove to be birth pangs both

painful and promising, and through his fate and faithfulness even death itself will be transformed into a kind of new birth, good news that doesn't feel good at all.

The disciples sitting opposite the temple could not see this any more than a baby on its birthday, or any of us served with an unwelcome eviction from the commonplace and the comfortable.

Yet Jesus insists, both with his words to his followers and the terrifying footsteps of his life and death and resurrection, that underneath the anguish is joy, that behind and beyond the death is life, that collapse is just the painful and unavoidable prelude to the new thing that God is slowly and successfully and inscrutably bringing to birth.

In the midst of things being horrible, Jesus looks around and says, it will get worse.

That is more than an idle threat or a cynical prediction; that is the promise which is, somehow, the good news of the Lord.