

HEAR, LEARN, LIVE GOD’S WORD—TREASURE IN HEAVEN
MARK 13:1-8
NOVEMBER 19, 2006—STEWARDSHIP DEDICATION/NEW MEMBERS
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Somewhere between dedicating our stewardship pledges, welcoming new members and sitting around turkey-laden tables on Thursday and the end time Jesus talks about with his disciples—somewhere between now and then, life goes on.

I always look forward to this autumn harvest Sunday. We have much to be thankful for: generosity of members who give year in and year out to continue ministry to this community and having new friends in Christ to share the journey.

But today and Thursday will pass. Monday comes along, winter is around the corner and we will be reminded that everyday is not about abundance and new friends. We will be reminded that we humans long for a fulfillment that no amount of good news in this life can satisfy.

I think this, in part, is what Jesus was saying to his followers when they stood outside the new Temple in Jerusalem—a powerful architectural symbol of human achievement. A temple not unlike, say, Riverside Church in New York City when it was new and opened its doors in 1930 or this church on our first Sunday in 1854.

The Temple in Jerusalem was magnificent: made of sparkling white marble with ten silver and gold plated gated courtyard entrances, massive forty foot columns, walls 150 feet high and two forty-five foot main doors of Corinthian bronze.

But even before the paint on the new Temple was dry, Jesus said that the most significant human achievements will pale next to God’s achievement of a new heaven and new earth.

A cosmic view can have benefits. Sometimes we take ourselves and our projects too seriously, assign more significance and value to them and to ourselves than we should.

Perhaps you saw the cover of this week’s *New Yorker*. It pictures an elephant on a pedestal in front of the White House being toppled by a rope and cable, evoking the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in the first days of the Iraq War.

It is a stunning and poignant piece of journalism: even powerful, indestructible leaders get toppled. The good news about the toppled elephant is that the voters did the toppling which ought to serve notice to any Democrats fantasizing about building new monuments in Washington.

The point is as visionary as humans get, by ourselves, we are incapable of building heaven on earth. What often happens is that someone has a good idea, a movement begins, lives are changed, resources accumulate for the cause, the mission starts to veer off track with the accumulation of power, power is abused, things go awry.

We’re good but we’re not God. We have glimpses of the heavenly city but we’re not the builders or the rulers. A cycle of rise and fall describes our species.

But Jesus promises a time when the things of this world will give way to the things of heaven. It is a strange, ambivalent message. It says, on the one hand, ultimate fulfillment is coming; on the other hand, not quite yet.

And here's our dilemma. Just when we think we've figured out what following Jesus means he makes a statement like this. What are God's people supposed to do? While the world limps through long centuries to final fulfillment there's apparently little we can do. God is the final actor on the stage of history.

Yet, it has often seemed to me this statement of Jesus undercuts the Christian life; makes it unattainable and illusive, like extending the finish line while the race is still in progress. No matter how much we do, how good we are, everything depends on God's action in the end.

But as I wrestled with this text I found at the heart of these strange, apocalyptic words a message we can comprehend because it is as close to the human experience and what it means to be Christian as anything else.

When we enter this sanctuary and light pierces these magnificent windows and the organ breaks the silence, when the strains of the choir reach for the heavens, when we listen to the Gospel, when we sing the old familiar hymns and utter prayers sometimes in sighs too deep for words—what we are doing says one colleague is worshipping, yes, but more profoundly we are searching.

Searching for God, trying to listen for God in the special sounds of this place, trying to find him in the stillness of our meditation, trying to receive him in the bread and wine we share at communion. Yet, deep beneath even our worship and searching is the undeniable fact that we are waiting. Waiting for God.

And there's our answer. What are we to do between this Sunday and the end time? We are to wait.

Remember the old saying, "hurry up and wait!" We can distract ourselves from waiting—I take a book of poems with me nearly everywhere I go to pretend I'm not waiting if I have to wait. But the bible is clear: nothing short of the opening of the heavens by God and the coming of Christ in glory will end our waiting.

I'm not arguing today for a literal or figurative reading of this text. Whether Jesus speaks of upheaval of the world without or within is not my point. The point is there is a biblical timetable. As the Christian year draws to a close next Sunday before Advent begins in two weeks we hear this account each November about the culmination of creation.

But the problem, perhaps we'd all agree, is that while we wait we live in darkness. There are bright rays of God light that penetrate our days. This Sunday is an example.

But darkness surrounds us. Maybe you heard the resolution of the American Catholic Bishops this past week in Baltimore. They voted to reaffirm that same sex lifestyles are sinful. Lord knows Presbyterians have had our own struggles with this important matter.

I mention it as a sign of darkness because there are human lives that long for fulfillment, relationships in families still broken over this issue. I am hopeful that in a

generation or less most of the church will open its doors to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons. But even then we will still be waiting in darkness.

So let me suggest two ways to deal with the call to God's people to wait. First, is to reject the temptation to think that the church is an end in itself. The notion that everything we do here is the only light there is instead of being merely a foreshadowing of the light that will come with the glory of Christ one day.

The book of Revelation reminds us when God's kingdom finally comes the church will be like a bride adorned and waiting for her husband. We are not an end in ourselves. We are a way station on the path to that time and place when God's fulfillment will quell our deepest longing and quench our deepest thirst.

I am asking us to extend our theological radius today. To see the significance of our life here as extending not just into 2007 but into eternity. To affirm that the light that shines on whatever successes we have in ministry and mission is not the light of Westminster but the light of heaven that will one day outshine all the world's darkness.

Second, if we are not to be lulled into thinking the church is an end in itself but finds its end in eternity, let us store up for ourselves treasure in heaven where our life and mission find their completion.

Someone said to me recently that the compass she uses for her interactions with people each day is the question how do I want to feel tonight before I go to sleep. When I lay my head down on the pillow what do I want my heart to feel?

So often, she said, that simple question helps her to be gentle and kind, to be patient and helpful and honest in trying moments.

That's storing up treasure in heaven—seeing the long term affect of our actions today not on our bank account or resume or career path but on our hearts. Literally seeing our treasure in heaven—the treasure of a clean heart, the treasure of a clear conscience, the treasure of satisfaction from helping someone else.

If we could ask ourselves as a church what difference will our actions have made not to our advancement but to the wellbeing of others, if we could do that I'll be we would change the pace and manner of our living. We would be more present to those around us, more aware of those in need, more free with our resources.

What would treasure in heaven look like for this congregation? Let me suggest it would have to do with more of what we already know how to do but sometimes hold back from—loving each other, being true to each other, and taking risks for each other as the cover of the bulletin says.

Yesterday we celebrated Grace Rich's 95 years of life. She was a devoted member and leader of this congregation. At the reception in the Case Library someone turned to me and commented on how many people were there and how many of them were young.

Grace outlived her own generation but she invested herself in a whole new set of friendships. One man, forty years younger than Grace, remembered her with tears in his eyes.

The person I was talking to then said, “it is life’s final test, isn’t it?” “What do you mean,” I asked. “I mean,” she said, “the people who show up at your memorial service.”

To know Grace was to sense that her treasure was in heaven. Her devotion to this congregation and community. Her feisty, compassionate, rock solid way of letting you know how important you were and that she really cared for you.

That’s what I’m saying today as we welcome new members and dedicate pledges for the year ahead.

If we see what we are doing here today as a transaction—something we give for something we get—our treasure will be subject to the rust and moth Jesus warns about.

But if we see our pledges and gifts of dollars as a down payment on God’s promised redemption of the human family and our new friends as partners with whom to bear witness to the light even as the darkness of our time overshadows us

then our treasure will be stored up where rust and moth do not consume and thieves cannot break in and steal.

And the light that shines in our hearts and eyes will be the light that no darkness can overcome. Amen.