

## **Sermon “Breaking Down the Impossible”**

**Kirk of St James**

**Sunday November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2024**

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Have you ever had an experience that shook your reality and changed the way you looked at things? When I was younger Dad caught people trespassing on our property two different nights, and then I met them one day as I was driving up our driveway after work. When confronted by the police they offered a feeble lie about looking for somewhere to go fishing which was obviously not true. That shook my sense of safety. I could not fall asleep at night, instead I would strain my ears wondering if they were going to return. Seeing a car come in our long driveway made me anxious. A place that had always felt safe no longer felt that way.

People who have experienced natural disasters have expressed this feeling on a much deeper level. In fact, for people who work with those who have suffered through a flood, tornado, tsunami, earthquake or other disaster often express a feeling of profound loss. While this loss is tied in part to the destruction of a home, property or death of a loved one, it is also deeply linked to the loss of feelings of safety or innocence. “They now know that something they once believed to be sure—that a towering structure would stand forever, for instance, or that the ocean would stay securely in its seabed—is no longer trustworthy. They have lost a foundational belief upon which they once built their lives.”

We can point to any number of world events that have likely caused similar feelings of being unmoored in the world. Situations that at one time felt impossible now play out on our television screens for better or worse. In Mark today we read a passage known as “the little apocalypse” because of the coming tribulations it describes. What begins as an innocent observation by ones of the disciples ends in a dire warning from Jesus.

To first place this passage into its larger context, Jesus has just experienced the triumphal entry. Upon his arrival in Jerusalem Jesus goes to the temple, curses a fig tree, cleansed the temple, and then his authority is questioned by the priests and scribes. In chapter twelve he begins to teach in parables while being questioned by the scribes who are trying to cause him to answer things blasphemously. He ends that passage with the story of the widows mite which is significant. In that account Jesus and the disciples are watching people give money at the temple when they see a widow give her last couple coins. While this passage can be read a few ways one of which is praising the woman for giving all she has, the other way is what I suspect to be closer to the truth. In that interpretation Jesus recognizes what the widow is sacrificing but, he is angry with a temple system that takes of advantage of the most vulnerable. If those attending the temple had been doing what was commanded of them, this widow would be someone they are helping, not taking the last little bit of what she has.

I believe this reading of the widows' mite is likely the correct one as we have the follow up that we read today. For the Galilean fishermen sitting and looking at the temple, it would have indeed looked impressive. In fact it is described by the Roman historian Tacitus as "the temple complex as a mountain of white marble adorned with gold, a temple of immense wealth. It's enormous stones mystified many, and the surrounding complex included sprawling courtyards, colonnaded courts, grand porches and balconies, covered walkways, and monumental stairs. Herod the Great built it to impress the wealthiest and most powerful rulers of the day, and he succeeded." Looking at it I am certain the disciples must have felt a great deal of awe, and when we experience moments of wonder things can feel permanent, or

immovable. Much like many looking at the Titanic believed it to be unsinkable. Unfortunately appearances and substance, are two different things.

The destruction of the temple would have felt impossible because of its size and grandeur, and also because many Jews believed it to be the closest point of contact between God and his people. Surely God would never allow his temple to be destroyed. Here is where the people went astray. Worship was never about the building—it was about the people. If all the temple held was people cheating others, creating abusive practices, and being empty of the worship God had asked of his people, then the temple was barren—much like the cursed fig tree. True worship did not require marble, gold, elaborate practices, or ritual. True worship asked that people love one another and love God. True worship asked you help the widow and the orphan. True worship required people to act justly and honestly. It might have been a beautiful building, but it held very little worth in the Kingdom of God.

One difficulty with this passage is that throughout history people have become preoccupied by the signs Jesus talks about and forget to live the gospel here and now. In fact if you are so inclined you can even go on-line and check out the “The Rapture Ready Index” at any point in time! I actually don’t suggest that all. When Jesus was teaching his disciples he didn’t mean for them to focus on the signs, he meant for them to focus on the one who is coming. It was not about the end of the world as we know it but rather about what it was meant to usher in—the promise of God’s kingdom.

Until that time we do our best to live lives shaped by our faith. What type of worship guides our lives? Where do we look when the circumstances around us begin to feel impossible? How do we practice peace, love, joy, and hope in a way that answers our call as a

church and fulfills our call by God? So that we are not simply a beautiful, and historical church but also a living community who loves God and our neighbour?

I would like to close today with a story I came across this week by Elizabeth Gilbert. As she tells it:

"Some years ago, I was stuck on a crosstown bus in New York City during rush hour. Traffic was barely moving. The bus was filled with cold, tired people who were deeply irritated with one another, with the world itself. Two men barked at each other about a shove that might or might not have been intentional. A pregnant woman got on, and nobody offered her a seat. Rage was in the air; no mercy would be found here.

But as the bus approached Seventh Avenue, the driver got on the intercom. "Folks," he said, "I know you have had a rough day and you are frustrated. I can't do anything about the weather or traffic, but here is what I can do. As each one of you gets off the bus, I will reach out my hand to you. As you walk by, drop your troubles into the palm of my hand, okay? Don't take your problems home to your families tonight, just leave them with me. My route goes right by the Hudson River, and when I drive by there later, I will open the window and throw your troubles in the water."

It was as if a spell had lifted. Everyone burst out laughing. Faces gleamed with surprised delight. People who had been pretending for the past hour not to notice each other's existence were suddenly grinning at each other like, is this guy serious?

Oh, he was serious.

At the next stop, just as promised, the driver reached out his hand, palm up, and waited. One by one, all the exiting commuters placed their hand just above his and mimed the gesture of dropping something into his palm. Some people laughed as they did this, some teared up but

everyone did it.

The driver repeated the same lovely ritual at the next stop, too. And the next. All the way to the river.

We live in a hard world, my friends. Sometimes it is extra difficult to be a human being. Sometimes you have a bad day. Sometimes you have a bad day that lasts for several years. You struggle and fail. You lose jobs, money, friends, faith, and love. You witness horrible events unfolding in the news, and you become fearful and withdrawn. There are times when everything seems cloaked in darkness. You long for the light but don't know where to find it.

But what if you are the light? What if you are the very agent of illumination that a dark situation begs for?. That's what this bus driver taught me, that anyone can be the light, at any moment. This guy wasn't some big power player. He wasn't a spiritual leader. He wasn't some media-savvy influencer. He was a bus driver, one of society's most invisible workers. But he possessed real power, and he used it beautifully for our benefit.

When life feels especially grim, or when I feel particularly powerless in the face of the world's troubles, I think of this man and ask myself, What can I do, right now, to be the light? Of course, I can't personally end all wars, or solve global warming, or transform vexing people into entirely different creatures. I definitely can't control traffic. But I do have some influence on everyone I brush up against, even if we never speak or learn each other's name.

"No matter who you are, or where you are, or how mundane or tough your situation may seem, I believe you can illuminate your world. In fact, I believe this is the only way the world will ever be illuminated, one bright act of grace at a time, all the way to the river."

I loved this story and what it represents. I know there are many sacred moments that

happen in the church, that happen within our own four walls here. But the truth of it is that I actually believe there are far more sacred moments happening out there in the world because of people like you and the choices you make “one bright act of grace at a time.” Continue to bring the light, in whatever ways God calls you.