

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco CA Y43
26 Pentecost (Proper 28B) 11 a.m. and 6 p.m.
Sunday 18 November 2018 Stewardship Sunday

1 Samuel 1:4-20
Canticle C (1 Samuel 2:1-10)
Hebrews 10:11-14, (15-16), 19-25
Mark 13:1-8

Getting Disillusioned

"Beware that no one leads you astray" (Mk. 13).

It hurts. It hurts so much that for two years I just tried not to think or talk about it. All my life I have cherished places of beauty, faith, tradition, and learning – places like the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

My grandfather who, was an Episcopal priest, studied at that seminary in the 1930's. He married my grandmother in St. John's Chapel on campus. Then in retirement they lived around the corner from its grassy lawns and stone buildings. As a child I used to ride the bus to visit them and they often took me there.

The location in Harvard Square with all the resources of the university was perfect for world-class scholarship. As a young man I took classes at EDS. I even asked Heidi to marry me in that same chapel. I associate that beautiful place with clergy and teachers who had the deepest influence on my thought and faith.

Then in midsummer of 2016 the trustees voted to close the school, sell the campus and transfer the endowment to Union Seminary in New York City. The library, chapel, the teachers and that precious green space at the heart of the city will be gone and no one will ever be able to have it back again. No stone will be left standing on stone.

There was no other place like this in my life. Mark evokes this same feeling of loss and disillusionment in today's gospel when he talks about the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

We chose our Cathedral's theme of truth, knowing that we would be reading through Mark this year. Of all the gospels this is the most direct, undistracted and paired down. Mark uses the simplest vocabulary and sentence structure. He desperately longs for us to see past our illusions and to know the truth.

The liturgical year started with the second half of this reading and finishes today with the first half. In Chapter 13 Mark employs an ancient literary form called apocalypse. It means to uncover or reveal, to literally pull back the veil so that we can see reality. Other examples of this genre appear in the Books of Daniel and Revelation.

Apocalyptic often employs vivid, poetic, even cryptic language to describe the current political situation and what will happen when God comes in glory. It describes a future when the stars fall to the "earth as the fig tree drops its fruit when shaken by a gale," It tells of the day when everything will be finished and God will roll up the sky like a parchment (Rev. 6:13-14).

One hundred years ago W.B. Yeats (1865-1939) captured this spirit in his World War I poem "The Second Coming." "Turning and turning in widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer; / Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned; / The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity."¹

Ultimately Apocalyptic as a genre is entirely about the hope that God will set things right. No matter how off kilter the world becomes God will repair all that is broken.

Some people dismiss the disciple's amazement at the size of the Temple as the naiveté of country people who find themselves in the big city. For me what they are really saying is, "Really Jesus? This is what we are taking on?" The temple is not just about piety. It is about power.² For faithful people it was the sacred heart of the entire world.

Herod the Great began building this, the third temple, in 20 BC. It took 80 years to be completed. That was in the year 63, only seven years before its destruction by the Romans. The stones were 35 feet long, 18 feet wide and 12 feet high. It seemed like they would be there forever. Jesus warns that it will all be completely swept away.

Scholars believe that Mark wrote his Gospel in the immediate aftermath of the Temple's destruction. The Roman troops had killed thousands, refugees flooded into other lands, the temple lay desecrated and in ruins. These are the ones Mark addresses.

He speaks to people in chaos and catastrophe. He stands beside the soldier damaged from the wars, the refugee with only two shirts in a smoky Wal-Mart parking lot or the one walking in an interminable caravan toward a closed distant border. He stands with the pregnant teenager, the addict, the hurt, the despairing, the ignored and left out.³ He stands with you and me.

He gives very simple advice, "Beware that no one leads you astray" (Mk. 13). He also shares with his friends the gift of disillusionment.

No one enjoys being disillusioned. We do not wake up and think, "I really hope to be disillusioned today." We do not want to give up our false images of God, of who we are and what we deserve. We like being the center of our world. We fight against a fresh picture that reminds us just how much we depend on God.⁴

Of course the problem with fighting against our own disillusionment is that we never change. We remain stuck, remote from the truth, from the reality we crave. God disillusion us so that we might reconfigure our life, so that we might serve God in a way we had never imagined before.

We live in the time of disillusionment. This week the *New York Times* ran articles about Facebook's strategy to delay, deny and deflect. These actions amounted to a refusal to take responsibility or change even as it was being manipulated by foreign spies to disrupt American life.⁵

Another three part series described the vast extent of Russian disinformation campaigns such as the false story that the American government made the AIDS virus and the one about Hilary Clinton that we call Pizzagate. The authors point out that all of us should be actively disillusioning ourselves. At every level of society we need to constantly be alert for false stories and stamp them out in the way that Eastern European countries have learned to do.⁶

Marion Nestle our Forum guest today makes a well-argued case that what we think of as healthy food has been utterly distorted by corporate interests who dominate nutrition science.⁷ Over the last two years we have been taking an unasked for crash course in disillusionment. We see how much more deeply racism, sexism and homophobia infect us.

For our Advent book group we are reading Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility*. She points out that white people have a huge tendency to ignore race altogether. Then when the subject is brought up we white people become so upset that we are distracted from ever really doing something to correct this vast problem.

I pray that these last ten days of unbreathable air, the destruction of a whole town, California environmental refugees, and a still rising death toll will be enough to wake us up. We have to stop believing the illusion that the natural world is unaffected by human activity. We urgently need to do something about climate change.

It hurts doesn't it? It hurts to become disillusioned. But that is the story of our time. Perhaps we have to become disillusioned about church too. I began by telling you how much pain I feel about the closing of Episcopal Divinity School. I wasn't as forthcoming about another strong emotion that I associate with this – my sense of regret. Every time the matter comes up I think of the ways that I could have helped and didn't.

These days I often remember the times when I didn't respond to a request for feedback on a faculty tenure decision, or when I just threw the fundraising appeal away. I could have tried harder to participate in the governance of the school. In short I didn't always act with the energy of someone who intensely cared about the school's mission.

When our society had more people who participated in religious life, it more easily supported a larger number and variety of religious institutions. Fewer people today identify themselves as religious and frankly this means we have to change.

On Wednesday our Board of Trustees unanimously endorsed a new mission statement for Grace Cathedral. It is "Reimagining church with courage, joy and wonder." As society changes radically, we cannot simply be satisfied to do exactly the same things in the same way. We need to see ourselves in God's hands, changing what we do in response to the Holy Spirit.

Today on Stewardship Sunday you have the opportunity to participate in the life of the church, to be part of this reimagining. Beware that no one leads you astray. If you love what Grace Cathedral stands for, now is the moment to step up and help.

Jesus gives the gift of disillusionment. Sometimes that hurts. But he also offers hope in the middle of disaster. He gives us the chance to change our life, to serve in ways we never imagined.

In Romans the Apostle Paul writes that, "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29). Jesus says that, "Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will not pass away" (Mk. 13:31). Elsewhere he says, "my peace I give to you" (Jn. 14:27). In the good times and the bad times, in catastrophe and ruin, God's grace will always be with us. Christ perpetually present moves us faithfully nearer to the God who calls us each by name.

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Second_Coming_\(poem\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Second_Coming_(poem))

² D. Mark Davis, "Things that Are Pangs in the Birth," Left Behind and Loving It, 11 November 2018. <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com>

³ Matt and Liz Boulton, "Birthpangs," SALT 14 November 2018. <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/lectionary-commentary-for-twenty-sixth-week-after-pentecost>

⁴ Brad Roth, "Living By the Word: November 18, Ordinary 33B," *The Christian Century*, 16 October 2018.

⁵ Sheera Frenkel, Nicholas Confessore, Cecilia Kang, Matthew Rosenberg and Jack Nicas, "Delay, Deny and Deflect: How Facebook's Leaders Fought Through Crisis," *The New York Times*, 14 November 2018.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/14/technology/facebook-data-russia-election-racism.html>

⁶ Adam B. Ellick, Adam Westbrook and Jonah M. Kessel, "Operation InfeKtion: The Worldwide War on Truth," *The New York Times*, 13 November 2018.
<https://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000006188105/countering-disinformation-active-measures.html?auth=login-email>

⁷ Marion Nestle, *Unsavory Truth: How Food Companies Skew the Science of What We Eat* (NY: Basic Books, 2018).