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Proper 28B: Mark 13:1-8

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A person named by [Akiyoshi Kitaoka](#) (Kee-TAO-ka) designed our bulletin cover for today. If you haven't looked at it yet, please do. As you can see, we have a pattern of lines intersecting vertically, horizontally, and diagonally. There are also black circles surrounded by a thin white ring scattered in a regular pattern throughout the grid. When you look at one circle, all (or almost all) of the other circles disappear! Depends on the person. This startling, concrete example about how there is more than our eyes can see is called the Ninio Extinction Illusion.

Today's reading from Mark builds on the limits of our sight. Jesus and disciples are exiting the temple in Jerusalem. As they are leaving, one of the disciples looks at the temple and marvels at how massive the stones are. And it's no wonder. This version of the temple is truly a sight to behold. 20 or so years before Jesus' birth, the Roman ruler Herod the Great greatly enlarged the temple to secure his place in history and to appease his Jewish subjects. Though in the same place (the temple is ALWAYS in the same place) it's like when they tear houses down around here and somehow manage to keep just a part of it so it's considered a renovation even though for all intents and purposes it's actually a rebuild. The footprint of the building is much, much larger. The wall that is left, the Western wall, the wailing wall, is but a retaining wall for the original structure, which goes to show you how big this temple was. This temple is an architectural marvel.

For most people who saw it, this temple is also imbued with significance independent of its appearance. The Temple Mount is traditionally seen as God's closest point of connection with the people of the covenant. The temple is incredibly special, regardless of what it looks like. Many of you have an inkling that love for a building can compound on itself. This church is a beautiful building, to be sure; **and** many of you love it even more because of what it **means** to you.

While the disciples are looking at the temple and admiring it, Jesus says the temple—this place absolutely central to Israel's life and worship, the established place of God's presence, this temple that took decades to build—will not stand forever. Actually, he says much more dramatically than that: "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down" (v.2). Jesus' words are a punch to the gut, an awful reminder that nothing, no

matter how powerful, no matter how integral, no matter how sacred – nothing is permanent.

Jesus' inner circle then asks Jesus when this will happen, how they will know when it is happening. Jesus answers: "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed.... For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginnings of the birthpangs" (v. 5-8).

Now, honestly I don't like this passage, particularly this latter part. Every time I see it assigned for a Sunday, I sigh. When we studied it this past Tuesday at Vestry, no one was psyched, which is totally fair. And yet the more I prayed with and looked at this passage this past week, the more I think Jesus is attempting to be comforting. In the Gospel according to Mark, Jesus has told stories repeatedly that God views the world differently than humans do: the first shall be last, and the last shall be first; becoming like children again. This passage is a variation on that theme, the theme that God views the world differently than we do. God, help us see.

We, like the disciples, see, in this passage, our own world, the destruction and violence; the deceivers and natural disasters. We feel like Jesus is reading OUR news, listening to OUR podcasts, living in and seeing OUR world. As terrifying as this passage can be, its intent is to encourage patience, hope, and trust in God, even when, or maybe especially when, life is incredibly chaotic. Jesus describes these apocalyptic type things so specifically in an effort to help us see that there is more than that, even if we cannot literally see it. Don't be alarmed. God, help us see.

This temple was destroyed, never to be rebuilt again, as this passage was being written or just after it was written. And yet somehow people of faith, both our siblings in the Jewish faith and early Christians, who saw it happen, who lived with this trauma, where somehow able to say, nope, this is not the end. Some were aided by this passage and other ones like it. God, help us see beyond the limits of our vision.

What would it be like to look beyond the wreckage, to believe that this is not all there is, to hope that there is more to reality beyond what our eyes and brains can comprehend? Could we let go of a little of the anxiety to which we cling so tightly? And if we let go of some of the anxiety, what if we slept better? And if we slept better, would we maybe have more patience with our friends and family– with ourselves– or maybe be more creative in our problem solving? How much better would the world be if even those small things could change some? And if those small things could change some, what else might change? Would we

laugh more often, more loudly? Would we have more energy to steward the environment more carefully for ourselves and for children and our children's children? What else could be different, be better for this world, for more people if we acknowledged that reality extends beyond the limits of our sight? God, help us see.

Speaking of reality extending beyond the limits of our sight, no one knows yet exactly how the Ninio Extinction Illusion works, why we cannot see all of the dots at the same time. Researchers initially thought the illusion had to do with the way the grid fell on the retina in our eyes. However, other researchers have debunked this theory, because changing the grid just the tiniest bit ruins the illusion, even though the cells should react the same way. The illusion seems to be happening in the brain itself, in the primary visual cortex located in the back of the brain. However, it's still not clear why exactly our brains think the dots are appearing and disappearing when they are not. Even though we cannot see the dots except for one, maybe two or three, at time, they are still there. There is just more than we are able to process for some reason we do not yet understand.

Those intersecting lines of devastation in the grids that are our lives and our world are easy to see. And we are called to see it, not ignore it. At the same time, Jesus also invites us to know that the dots of God's presence are there, too– that God is still there, God is still there loving, and caring, and working– even when we can't see it all at once. Jesus, help us to look beyond the limits of our physical vision to see with the eyes of our hearts. God, help us see. *Amen.*