

**The Pillars of Faith**  
**Mark 13:1-8**  
**I Samuel 2:1-10**  
**November 15, 2015**

There was a presbytery meeting at Camp Geneva on the lakeshore that beautiful Tuesday morning, a morning when the earth stood still...

The meeting was interrupted with a sudden and somber announcement that something tragic was happening in New York City and possibly our nation's capital as well. Those gathered, the pastors and elders of Presbyterian churches throughout West Michigan knew that they were immediately needed back home—our church homes and our personal homes. I'd been trying to call home to speak with my wife who, some of you may know, is a New Yorker. But back in those days the phone line was also used for the internet and Erin had the TV off that morning while she was working on our home computer. I remember how frustrated I was that I couldn't get through. When something earth-shattering like that happens it is human instinct to go to the person on whom you most depend, the person you care most about to give comfort and receive it. I finally got through after many tries and shared with her the news that much of the rest of world already knew. It was now after 10:00 and she had no idea. "You should check on your brother," I suggested with some trepidation. My brother in law Kerry worked on Wall Street and I imagined him caught in all the chaos, the debris, the panic. I hoped he had no reason to be in the towers that day.

Do you remember where you were?

Days come in our lives when we live in uncertainty. Some of you may remember other days that also shook your world and your faith. A personal aside, I wrote this sermon on Thursday afternoon, putting

in the finishing details on Friday morning. I was determined to share with you some personal reflections on 9/11 as it relates to the passage for today. I never imagined the events that would follow Friday night as France endured a horrific terrorist attack.

For my parents, and for some of you, that question of “Where were you?” brings back memories of December 7, 1941. For much of the world, WWII was a time when the assumptions of the past were called into question. One need only look around the world today and see that we are still dealing with the results of that war—the nuclear world we live in after Hiroshima, the formation of Israel after the Holocaust and the upset in the Middle East, the resulting division of nations that are still working themselves out. Turmoil, religious fundamentalism, government overthrows that we naively thought would lead to an “Arab Spring” (Do you remember that term? When it *almost* seemed possible to imagine peace in the Middle East?) We continue to witness entire institutions, buildings (some of them ancient sites of worship), minority cultures, all being wiped out in an ongoing stream of violence.

It is truly apocalyptic.

That must have been what the Jews of Jerusalem felt, beleaguered after countless unsuccessful revolts and crackdowns from the far stronger Roman armies. When they lost their temple, it must have seemed truly apocalyptic. Remember, as we read today, for Jews and Jewish Christians this was their experience in the first Century. “What huge stones, what a wonderful building! Surely this will be here forever!” That’s what the disciples say as they walk out of the temple with Jesus.

But not even forty years later *it is all gone*.

When we visited the Holy Land, one of the places I most looked forward to visiting was the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. This the high point in the old city of Jerusalem where it is said that King Solomon built up with stone a great leveled area to build his Temple in the Tenth Century B.C. That temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587, but then was rebuilt in the centuries following. During the time of Jesus, the Temple area and the Temple itself had been restored by King Herod. He built walls surrounding the area that enclosed about 36 acres, which is the size of about seven football fields. Michigan Stadium would easily fit into it with plenty of room left over for Spartan Stadium. In the midst of this open area the Temple was built, certainly one of the wonders of the ancient world at the time. The retaining wall for the Temple complex was about 187 feet high, the height of a 12-15 story building.

Now, that's all that's left.

The Jews still go to pray at this Western Wall, and they write their prayers on small pieces of paper and place them in the cracks of the stones hoping that God will hear them in such an especially holy place. But the Temple itself is gone. It didn't even last to the end of the century in which Jesus lived. For Christians and for Jews this was a cataclysmic event. The Temple had always been the place for worship for the Jewish people, but also for Jews who had converted to the Christian faith it was still their spiritual home. Jesus had worshiped there, so had all the disciples. For them it must have felt like what they once believed was a certain, stable world was now built on *pillars of sand*.

That happens to all of us during uncertain times. It happened to many of us on that Tuesday morning in September, 14 years ago. It must be happening to many in France today. They must have assumed that going to a concert or a soccer match was a simple, safe thing to do. What must they be thinking today?

But regardless of violence going on *around* you; the real question for us is what is happening *within* you during such trying times. As Mary Lou read for us this morning from the Canticle of Hannah in the Hebrew Scripture, we like to think God has founded the pillars of the earth and we are on a solid foundation. But then events happen and it feels like the pillars of the earth are shaky at best and we can wonder if there is a foundation to our world at all. Uncertainty pervades every inch of our lives.

For many, the experience of WWII caused a questioning of faith and resulted in the abandonment of their beliefs. How could God allow that to happen? Where was Christ in the midst of the Holocaust or Hiroshima? Some gave up, decided that there was no God and never stepped into a church again. Some doubled down on their previously held beliefs, honing a kind of fundamentalism that marked the remainder of the century, especially here in the US.

But for others, though, their reality was altered, they found that God was still there. Something was shifting, their beliefs were challenged but their faith was growing. And this is true for us as well; as our experiences grow, our faith grows too, even in what feels like apocalyptic times. We live in uncertain times, not just for the world, but for each of us as individuals, families, churches. It might not be an earth-shaking event for the whole world, like 9/11 or Hiroshima, but it may be something that shakes our personal world.

I want to return to the story of my brother-in-law Kerry. As it turns out, when Erin called her brother's house she expected to get her sister-in-law, Kathi, but instead it was her brother's voice she heard on the other end of the phone. He had gone in late that day from their home in New Jersey and was turned around at the Holland Tunnel as news broke out over the radio of the events occurring at the World Trade Center. Erin was relieved but also confused that he'd gone in late, "Are you alright?" she asked.

It was then that the earth seemed to crack under *her* feet. Her brother explained that he'd stayed home that morning to get the kids ready for school and put them on the bus because Kathi was ill, very ill. They had just learned the day before that she had a brain tumor—a glioblastoma which is a very aggressive kind of tumor. They were making plans for immediate surgery. Kerry was 44 at the time, Kathi, 41, and their four children ranged in age from 8-12.

*Their* 9/11, their earth shattering event, had already happened the day before, on 9/10.

As some of you may know, because we have had Kathi on our prayer list many times over the last years, Kathi endured multiple surgeries and multiple cancer treatments. As a young mother she vowed to see her four kids through their childhood and defying the odds she did just that. Her youngest child, our nephew KJ, was a freshman in college when she finally succumbed in the spring of 2013.

It may not be a tsunami or an earthquake, for us it may be the words of a doctor telling us how long we or a loved one have to live. It may be a divorce you never saw coming. It may be that day of the market crash and those stocks you had planned on for the basis of your retirement are no longer there. It's when something on which you had counted suddenly changes or disappears. It's when you had been so certain of your life and now you have to live with uncertainty. It's when your faith seems to have no solid pillars anymore. Mark's community was devastated by the destruction of the Temple. Those large stones—gone. That place where so many of them had worshiped—no more. The ground underneath them felt unstable and what they believed had been certain and secure in their lives now seemed like shifting sand. Where could they turn for certainty? Could they turn to the church, turn to faith? Does God provide certainty? Perhaps, but they also remembered the words of Jesus about the changing nature of the world. They lived in an uncertain world where one never knew what would happen next. And so do we—we live in an uncertain world.

But the cure for uncertainty isn't certainty, it's *courage*.

Jesus is telling his followers to be awake, be aware, be prepared for changing circumstances. Be brave in the face of change, because God is always bringing new things into the world. And when something new is being born, there are always the birth pangs. Our faith is always growing because the world is always changing and change is painful. Jacques Ellul once said that “the movement of faith is unceasing, because no explanation it offers is ever finished.”<sup>1</sup> We will be frustrated if we spend our lives in search of certainty. As limited human beings it is not possible to be completely certain. But we find our meaning and purpose in the courage of relationships.

Author Daniel Taylor says, “Meaning derives from a right relationship with God, based not on certainty and conformity, but on risk and commitment.”<sup>2</sup> We don't look to God for *certainty*; we look to God for *courage*. My sister-in-law Kathi had courage. God's help comes in helping us face the future, not making the future easy. We have uncertain lives in an uncertain world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. And what our God offers us through our relationship with him and with one another is not certainty, but courage.

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1 Ellul, Jacques, *The Living Faith: Belief and Doubt in a Perilous World*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers. 1983

2 Taylor, Daniel. *The Myth of Certainty*. p.94.