



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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"Is it Always Going to be this Way?"

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 15, 2015
The Twenty-Fifth Sunday After Pentecost —Based on Mark 13:1-8*

It was early in the morning, nearly 3 a.m. It was frigid cold one November night close to Thanksgiving, as I remember.

I was sitting in front of a roaring fire with Tom and Bill and their families.

Just weeks before, a huge forest fire had ravaged a large portion of their timber holdings, one of Tom's sons had been injured while driving under the influence of drugs and alcohol, and Tom's wife had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

We gathered in those early morning hours to hear the news . . . Tom and Bill's brother had died in New Orleans—shot by a would-be robber while visiting the French Quarter, innocently walking with friends from a restaurant to their vehicle.

Quietly into the darkness Tom asked, "Is it always going to be this way?"

In our gospel text, Jesus said to the disciples, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left standing upon another; all will be thrown down . . . when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place . . . nation will rise against nation . . . there will be earthquakes . . . and famine and plagues." And in Matthew's version of the same event, he adds: "and before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you."

The disciples respond by asking (essentially), "Is it always going to be this way?"

World War I; the Depression; World War II; Korea; the Cold War; the Civil Rights Movements; assassinations; Viet Nam; AIDS; Desert Storm; 9/11; Iraq and Afghanistan;

Family relations; mental illness; drug and alcohol abuse; income inequalities; political infighting; suicide bombers; police killings and police officers being killed; ISIS . . .

"Red and yellow, black and white" (the old antiquated hymn children used to recite), while they are precious in his sight, they (we) are hurting each other and being hurt by each other.

Is this the last word on life? Is it always going to be this way?

How does this all end?

When the disciples asked Jesus these questions, they had in mind facts: How is it that the great Temple is going to be reduced to a mound of rubble? How is the world as we know it going to end . . . and when is this going to happen? And, what is this you've told us about coming to us again? When will this be? How? Will it include us?

But underneath the quest for facts, they had deeper questions, questions of the heart: Is this going anywhere? Is there any conclusion that will make sense? Is there any ending that will give our lives meaning?

Last year my mother had me drive her on an excursion—to my father's grave in an old rural cemetery. When we arrived at his tombstone, she carefully placed a flowering plant at its base. She asked me to read a passage from the Bible and have a prayer. I chose to read from Romans 8, where the Apostle Paul wrote about finding hope and promise in the midst of hardship and death: "What then shall we say to this suffering . . . What shall we say in the face of such calamities? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things as well? Who is to

condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God. Who shall separate us from the love of God? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or peril or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

As we were walking back to the car, we passed another tombstone—a small one with a tiny carved lamb on the top. "That was Aunt Maggie's little girl," she said. "She lived only four years: September, 1935 - August, 1939. I remember the day we buried her. She caught a bad cold, developed croup, and then pneumonia. The old tale was that the physician gave her the wrong medicine and she died. Aunt Maggie used to say that 'old Dr. Williams killed my baby girl.' But we all knew that was just her anger and grief talking. You know," she thought, "things like this just happen, we don't always know why."

The disciples, then and now, want to know: "Is it always going to be this way?" "How does this all end?" . . . The 8th chapter of Romans, or the tragic death of little girls?

I think when we ask these questions they come out of the place in the human soul that hungers to be shaped by hope. We hope for some word, some action from God that we can hold onto—so that we can trust in something sure, something sustainable, something life-giving and not just death-dealing.

Christian hope for the world is founded on a God who can and will overcome the inhumanity and chaos of our society. The kingdom of perfect justice and love will never completely come this side of heaven; it will only come at the end of history. And it will happen because of the reigning Christ, and not by mere human ingenuity and strength.

And, secondly, the New Testament also teaches that the same reigning Christ who will bring all things into fulfillment is also at work here and now through the presence and power of the Spirit. . . Working through us and the events of history . . . Restoring us and the larger world—now!

The Christ who will come is the same Christ who loves the world in the present.

If you've ever been to one of the several German concentration camp museums, then you know of the poignant power and tragedy of the displays. There's one at Dachau, another at Buchenwald, and a third at Auschwitz. Well, there's a fourth, a smaller one called Sachsenhausen. I visited this isolated museum east of Berlin in 2004. In the museum there is a photograph of a mother and her little girl being marched to the gas chambers . . . and there's not one thing that they can do about it! And so the mother does the last act of love that she has available to her: she puts her hands in front of her little girl's eyes so that she will not have to see where she is going. As we gathered in that place, Christians, Jews and others of other traditions, quietly prayed: "Oh God, do not let that be the last word."

The disciples asked Jesus: "How does this all end?"

Jesus seemingly said: "There will be wars and tumult and death, but that is not the last word . . .

There will be false messiahs and terrible conflict, but that will not be the last word . . .

There will be calamities and destruction, and the death of little girls, but that is not the final word. . . I am the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end . . . "

And the Apostle Paul adds: "And there is not anything that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, not anything."