

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Sacred Stones”
Mark 13:1-8
March 13, 2016

When I was a child, I had a pastor that was widely respected throughout the city. His church grew and grew until it didn't make sense to keep expanding the building. So, they started another church in a different part of the city... and then another and another.

Things were good. There was vibrancy about the place. This pastor could preach and teach and people were growing. They loved him and trusted him.

One night my parents got a phone call. There was going to be an emergency church meeting the following evening. The pastor had taken a vacation.... that no one knew about... and taken his secretary with him... and wasn't coming back.

I once had a firm set of beliefs about the bible... and how I could use it to know what God's **rules** for my life were... and how it had **clear cut answers**.... and how I could know for **absolute certainty** that what I believe is true.

One day I sat in a classroom, where a teacher asked questions you aren't supposed to ask... questions that began to unravel my foundation, and my certainty cracked. I couldn't ignore the inconsistencies anymore, and all that held my faith together began to fall apart, and I was no longer sure if I had been worshipping God... or worshipping the Bible.

A few years later, as a young adult, I had a Pastor who opened my eyes to God in the most profound ways... who somehow seemed to preach and to pray in a way that connected me to the heart of God... like never before.

And his ministry filled me with life...

and renewed my hope in what church could be...

and Christianity could be...

and made me want to stay in that church with those people for as long as I could... because being there with him as our pastor was like finding myself... and finding God again.

Then, one day he called me into his office. And told me he was taking a new job... and my heart sank. I knew it would never be the same.

I was learning again... the very things that bring us near to God, must eventually be taken away...just as Jesus said.

There once was a group of people standing outside the temple... admiring its beauty. Everything about the temple in that time was glorious and larger than life. For the previous 15 years it had been going through a renovation and expansion. And so every year they made their pilgrimage to Jerusalem and saw the temple again, they were

struck afresh by its always expanding beauty and grandeur. It was thought to be the most beautiful building in the world.

There were massive precious stones that seemed to radiate with the light of God. There was something about being there next to the temple that filled them with awe. Breathing in the air with its incense and sacrificial smoke was, for them, like breathing in God's presence and tasting the transcendent.

The temple was the place where they remembered who they truly are...
and no matter what had happened in the last year,
no matter what mistakes had been made,
or what loneliness they had known...
this was the place where they could encounter God's presence again. This place connected them to the Divine.

So, as the disciples follow Jesus out of the Temple grounds that Tuesday evening of Holy Week, they look back at it, and they can't help but give thanks to God for it. **"Jesus, isn't the temple magnificent?"** They say.

And in this moment, of taking in the beauty of the temple, Jesus says to them, **"Truly, truly. It is beautiful and it is God's great gift to you."** *Or at least, is sure would have been nice if he said that.* All his dooms-day talk about **"not one stone being left on top of another"**... kind of ruins the moment.

You almost get the sense that Jesus is channeling the spirit of Eyore..., or maybe the character of Sadness from the movie *Inside Out*. **"You know it's all just a house of cards, right? It'll be blown away in the wind."**

The disciples are shocked. Of course they are.
"When is that going to happen?" they ask.

Jesus... doesn't answer. Did you notice that? He doesn't tell them when, because the timing isn't the point. The truth-of-it is the point. It's not going to last.

Holy things,
 holy places,
 and holy people in our lives... that draw us into the divine presence... aren't always going to be there.

"The days will come when not one stone will be left upon another."

"There will be people who come in my name, but don't be led astray. Don't go after them." Jesus says.... because he knows we're prone to do just that.

We have sacred objects, sacred stones so to speak. We all have them. These sacred places and people that represent God's presence for us. They are our main... or sometimes only ... connection to God. They become a path to the divine for us. And they are a gift in that way.

God knows, we need them.
We need particular places,
and we need rituals,
and we need people to help us encounter God.

The biblical story is full of examples of this. It's what the Ark of the Covenant was. Everywhere it went it brought God's presence to that place.

It was the "Tent of Meetings," was about for the people in the wilderness. The Tent of Meetings gave the people a sacred place... where they could "meet" with God. ***They needed a place that reminded them of God's presence...*** especially in the wilderness that they were living.

And now... the temple was that place for them. It's the place where they could meet with God.

You and I need that too.
We need sacred space and sacred relationships.
We need rituals that open our hearts and connect us to the Divine.

But we also need to remember that, "**Not a single stone will be left upon another,**" as Jesus puts it. None of it is permanent, as much as we want it to be... as much as we'd like those sacred stones to always be there so we can come back any time we need to.

But God knows, they must also be taken away...

Do you remember the story where Jesus takes Peter James and John up on a mountain and transfigures before them. He becomes like pure light and Moses and Elijah appear there too. It's all so amazing that in the after glow of it all Peter says, "**We should set up a little prayer chapel here, Jesus. One for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.**" Peter is trying to capture and hold onto that sacred space and place.

It's what we all do. We want to keep it just as it is, and hold on to it, so that we can encounter the divine there again and again... In fact, it becomes so important to us that along the way we begin to mistake the instruments of God's presence in our lives... for God's self. We mistake the mountain for God's self.

It's our natural tendency.
The gifts are so often mistaken for the Giver.
And in the process we stop worshiping God
and start worshiping the things that have connected us to God...
which means we are really worshiping an idol.

An idol is, after all, nothing more than a concrete object that ***represents*** God's presence to us... that somewhere along the way we've begun to replace ***for*** God's self.

It's just so easy for our hearts to begin to love and hold to those sacred objects in our lives... to love them... as if they, themselves, were God.

Richard Rohr notes how Catholics and Protestants each do this in their own way. He writes, **“When I see what Catholic’s have done to Mass and what Protestants have done with the Bible, I recognize how easy it is to make the medium the message.... Most human beings cling to... spiritual symbols in literal ways.... But unfortunately they gradually let the symbol stand over and above the reality.”**¹

“The temple isn’t permanent.” Jesus says. It’s not the point. The people coming in my name... they are not the message.

Yes, we need the symbols.

We need the bible. We need the Lord’s Table. We need this church and this place... and one another.

But they are here to point beyond themselves.

So don’t go after them. Go after God.

God comes to us through them so that we might come to see and to know God, not so that we can worship them.

C. S. Lewis talks about this too. Describing the things that connect us to God, Lewis writes: **“Every one of them, followed for its own sake and isolated from its source, becomes an idol whose service is damnation.”**²

Worshiping the sacred stones in our life... will lead you to death, to emptiness. Every sacred stone will eventually disappoint you.

This church... will disappoint you... at some point it will.

This pastor... will disappoint you... it’s unavoidable.

The place you love to go to meet God will.

The method you use will.

Every gift that allows you to encounter God, followed for it’s own sake, becomes an idol. It’s one of the great paradoxical realities: **“Not a single stone will be left.”**

And Jesus was right. By the time Mark was writing these words down, there was a Jewish uprising, and Rome crushed Jerusalem... and destroyed the temple.

The Holy Place for the people of God was no more. They were left having to learn how to find God when those gifts were gone... when the gift of the Temple, of their identity... of their history, was gone.

Some of us have known a bit of what that’s like. Somewhere along the way, we’ve lost that person who connected us to God... a parent, maybe... a pastor... a friend.

¹ R. Rohr, *The Return of Adam*, 104.

² Williams and the *Arthurian*, *Taliessin Through Logres*, *The Region of the Summer Stars*, and *Arthurian Torso*, by Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 335.

These gifts come... and they are taken away.
The stones are given... and the stones are removed.
Both are always there in any healthy spiritual journey.

And both are there throughout the scriptures:

Moses brings the Ten Commandments down the mountain on the two stone tablets, and Moses breaks the two stone tablets. It's this great image. The concrete given and taken away.

Then in Leviticus and Deuteronomy the worshiping life of Israel is set up. The details are all given on how to do it right. And then, later comes Isaiah and Jeremiah undoing and making fun of those very practices.

It is the very pattern at the heart of the Gospel story. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. God comes to us in the concrete form of Jesus. And there in his life we see and know and encounter the Divine presence. But he came only for a time. There was also a departing.

This is exactly what the disciples are about to experience. It's Tuesday night of Holy Week. They are on the cusp of the Passion Events. And so, Jesus keeps saying: Keep Watch! It's about to happen....

This moment, outside the temple... is just two days before Jesus will be hanging on a cross... and all that they thought they could depend on will be stripped away. They are about to enter into a great emptiness...

Jesus, very heart of God, the concrete presence of God will be taken from them. ***We don't even get to cling to Jesus...*** to keep him with us. Sometimes he is so present, and sometimes there is this great absence. This is the sacred pattern...

St. Ignatius talked about it in terms of *consolations* and the *desolations*.

Consolations are those gifts of God's presence.

Desolations are those experiences of God's absence.

Both of them come. And the truth is... both of them are needed.

But remember, as painful and awful as it is, ***the cross is also the means of a profound transformation*** for the disciples. They must go through the emptiness... and the loss... before they can encounter the resurrection.

This has always been the sacred pattern: We need these gifts that open us up to God, and we need them taken away...

because it is when the stones are taken away,
that deeper transformation can happen...
that we learn what faith is really like.

And that is the only way to learn to encounter the unmediated pure presence of God ... the presence of God in all things.

So, watch for it, Jesus says. Stay alert!
It's coming and it's needed:
The cross is around the corner...
It must come...

Mary Oliver has a poem that ends with these words I've come to cherish:

"To live in this world
you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.³"

The sacred stones are given. But not one will remain on top of the other. None of them will last.

So, love them. Hold them against your bones knowing your life depends on it, but don't worship them. Look past them to the God who comes to you through them.

So that when they are gone,
and there is nothing left,
you will know that God is still there, even in the emptiness.

Prayer:

*O God, we are so grateful for the consolations that come,
for the sacred people, the sacred places that connect our heart to your heart.*

Forgive us for our tendency to make them into idols.

As we come to your table, meet us now.

As we take the bread and the cup, open our spirit to your Spirit.

Come and fill our deepest hunger.

We ask these things in the name of the One who taught us to pray, saying, Our Father...

Silent Reflection: "Healthy religion always finds God in the present much more than in the past. *The past is only to create a runway for us so we have some communal assurance that ours is a valid experience....* The trouble is that many people spend their whole life defending and protecting their takeoff point." ~ R. Rohr

³ "In Blackwater Woods" by Mary Oliver, from *American Primitive*. © Back Bay Books, 1983.