

“This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” Mark 13:8

The huge stones of the temple that Herod built in Jerusalem are impressive; the wide-eyed disciples looking up at this place of worship feel awe. We have felt that awe looking up at soaring buildings, glass windows that shatter the light in hundreds of directions, or even the remnants of the standing rocks of the Temple itself. The disciples see substance and permanence; Jesus tells them the stones will come tumbling down. That statement makes the disciples wonder when this will happen—surely this destruction will be the end of their world. Jesus says no, this will not be the end.

When the Gospel of Mark was being written, it is likely that the Fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple was imminent. In this text of Mark we hear, “no this is not the end;” Jesus warns that despite the apparent chaos and conflict, this is not the end of the world; it is the beginning of a new life, a different life. We also notice Jesus questioning why the disciples are so distracted by this place of worship that was paid for by the widow’s offering—who gave out of her poverty while the rich gave little out of their abundance. In a surprise twist we are invited to think of the people who worked to build this extravagant building who were slaves or the poor who are being taken advantage of by the powerful. In Early Christianity there were persecutions and conflict—the people listening to these words of Jesus are reminded that this upheaval and chaos and even loss of life is not the end of God’s story of God’s beloved people.



To think of chaos and disruption, even as we have experienced it during the Pandemic, as “birth - pangs” that bring forth new life is a powerful and hopeful way of entering into this the passage. Jesus points toward cosmic forces and every day conflict disrupting life as we know it; he warns that this is not the end and do not be led astray. The message of “fear not” in the midst of destruction, anxiety and uncertainty is a message that is personal and communal. Change comes with challenge and difficulty.

We cannot face the systemic changes that need to happen without disruption and destruction. We cannot embrace a greener way to live with out pain and imagination. What we know is that we can be led stray by false cries and that the stones will come tumbling down, whether we bump into them or not. What we know is that God is with us as we walk.

Spirituality and Social Movements A Faith Created by Courageous Movements

In his book We Make the Road by Walking, (...) Brian McLaren describes some of the Spirit-led movements that shaped Judaism from the time of Moses, and sustained Christianity. We must remember that such movements are not simply a past occurrence, but something in which we are called to participate in our own time.

I believe that the Spirit of God works everywhere to bring and restore aliveness—through individuals, communities, institutions, and movements. Movements play a special role. In the biblical story [of Exodus], for example, Moses led a movement of liberation among oppressed slaves. They left an oppressive economy, journeyed through the wilderness, and entered a promised land where they hoped to pursue aliveness in freedom and peace. Centuries after that, the Hebrew prophets launched a series of movements based on a dream of a promised time . . . a time of justice when swords and spears, instruments of death, would be turned into plowshares and pruning hooks, instruments of aliveness [Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3]. Then came John the Baptist, a bold and nonviolent movement leader who dared to challenge the establishment of his day and call people to a movement of radical social and spiritual rethinking. . . .

When a young man named Jesus came to affiliate with John’s movement through baptism, John said, “There he is! He is the one!” Under Jesus’ leadership, the movement grew and expanded in unprecedented ways. . . . It rose again through a new generation of leaders like James, Peter, John, and Paul, who were full of the Spirit of Jesus. They created learning circles in which activists were trained to extend the movement locally, regionally, and globally. Wherever activists in this movement went, the Spirit of Jesus was alive in them, fomenting change and inspiring true aliveness. . . .

[Christianity] began as a revolutionary nonviolent movement promoting a new kind of aliveness on the margins of society. . . . It claimed that everyone, not just an elite few, had God-given gifts to use for the common good. It exposed a system based on domination, privilege, and violence and proclaimed in its place a vision of mutual service, mutual responsibility, and peaceable neighborliness. It put people above profit, and made the audacious claim that the Earth belonged not to rich tycoons or powerful politicians, but to the Creator who loves every sparrow in the trees and every wildflower in the field. It was a peace movement, a love movement, a joy movement, a justice movement, an integrity movement, an aliveness movement.

Reference: Brian D. McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking: A Year-Long Quest for Spiritual Formation, Reorientation, and Activation* (Jericho Books: 2015), xvii–xix. Center for Action and Contemplation, Richard Rohr, Monday, November 30, 2020.

