

November 18, Ordinary 33B (Mark 13:1-8; Daniel 12:1-3; Hebrews 10:11-25)

## **Sometimes we need a good old-fashioned swig of bracing disillusionment.**

by [Brad Roth](#) in the [October 24, 2018](#) issue

When the disciples gaze upon the temple in Jerusalem, they see permanence: “What large stones and what large buildings!” Jesus, the one they suspect just might redeem and restore Israel, bursts their messianic bubble. “Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” The restored temple will not be the epicenter of his work. Not only that, but truth will be shaken, the world scorched by war and rumbled by competing kingdoms as nations jostle for power and every ruler and his uncle claim Messiah papers. There will be earthquakes and famines. “This,” says Jesus, “is but the beginning of the birth pangs.”

Jesus’ teaching about the temple fits with his words about where we place our treasure—his warning about moths and robbers. The reading from Daniel speaks of the “time of anguish such as has never occurred since nations came into existence.” Daniel knew that what happens in the day-to-day life of countries and rulers has cosmic implications. Michael fights for God’s people. God’s kingdom cracks the foundations of earthly kingdoms like a stone thrown from heaven (Dan. 2:44–45). The Son of Man receives “dominion and glory and kingship” (Dan. 7:14). The earth is porous to the ways of heaven.

This means that while our work is on earth, the measure of our hope is in heaven. The Lord works in circuitous ways, and we can’t always know the import of our acts and sacrifices and lives. Things fall apart, even crafted and precious things. We fail. And yet even failure can be woven into the greater work of God.

That’s small comfort when it’s our temple that the Lord Jesus is predicting will be thrown down. It’s our tithes that built it. Those chiseled stones are splashed with our sweat. And weren’t we merely doing what God required of us?

What large stones and large buildings we have made for our universities and hospitals, our mission agencies and pillared downtown first churches! And, well, here we are, in this postinstitutional none-dom that was not the future we imagined and built toward. What now?

Says Jesus: “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” Something is being brought to birth. And it hurts. In the eternal fruitfulness of God, the plans that God has laid for God’s people are for good and not destruction. As the reading from Hebrews says, we “hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering.” We “provoke one another to love and good deeds.” We do not neglect “to meet together.” We “encourage one another, especially as we see the Day of the Lord approaching.” After all, we “are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken” (Heb. 12:28).

That God is bringing something new to birth may seem counterfactual. But there are signs around us of God’s good work—though not, perhaps, in the places we previously sought permanency. What was, was. Now new things are being birthed by the renewing Spirit of God. They’re in continuity with God and God’s plans. They just might not look like what we had hoped.

I don’t like disillusionment any more than you do. I’ll keep my well-built illusions, thank you very much. But in its true aspect, disillusionment can be a gift—if a hard one—because it’s literally the undoing of our illusions, the unwinding of our false images of God, of life, of what we’re owed, of who we are. Disillusionment is an antiseptic rinse for our false selves and idols. It can usher us into a space where we have a chance to reconsider, to come to a fresh perspective on who God is and who we are in relationship to God. I don’t like it, but I’m convinced that sometimes we need a good old-fashioned swig of bracing disillusionment.

At least, I know I have sometimes needed to be disillusioned so that God could freshly configure my life around God’s kingdom. There was that matter of doctoral program nonadmittance, my short stack of *rejectamenta* (the thin envelopes always spell trouble). This got me seriously contemplating congregational ministry. There was that church, once upon a time, that would have been such a perfect fit, if only they would have realized it. Except that God needed me, in ways I could never have anticipated, elsewhere. I have more stories. Disillusionment never loses its bite or relevance for me.

But a little disillusionment goes a long way. We may need it, but we also need to remember that “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29). “Heaven and earth will pass away,” says Jesus, but not his words (Mark 13:31). Or his church (Eph. 3:20–21). Christ’s direction in history has been cast and will not be altered.

Maybe we’ve stumbled again into the days of Ezekiel. The temple has been thrown down. God’s glory has left the building, and God’s people discover themselves in a strange land. But it turns out that the temple wasn’t the heart of God’s work in the way the people thought it was. God’s chariot arose, and God went to be with the people in their exile (Ezek. 10).

This is why we dare to place our hope in the unchanging, ever-loving God. The religious landscape is being rucked around us, just as it was for Ezekiel and later for the first disciples. And yet, we see the brilliant permanency of God’s faithful presence among God’s people, in whatever strange future they find themselves.