

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

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Stewardship I, Mark 10:46-52

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. Amen.

Making the turn from Charlesgate, chin-high weeds and feral plantings obscure the Fens Gardens and crowd the sidewalk, yellow-green fingers reaching in the breeze for passers-by. Driving beneath a crooked and lightless traffic signal, we continue past the crumbling Berklee façade, potholes punched through the pavement to the mossy remains of the Mass Pike below. The raised doors of the Engine 33/Ladder 15 firehouse look out on a ruinous sea, unmoored sheets of asphalt leaning against curbs and tipping into sinkholes deeper than subway tunnels.

Like flashes in the corner of our eye, we sense living creatures tucked between these buildings and peering out of their glassless windows. We cannot see them – cannot discern whether they cower or they coil – but some awakened, ancient energy inside us twitches alarm. Our heartbeat quickened, we lock the doors and tighten our grip on the steering wheel.

As Chapter 10 in the Gospel of Mark begins, Jesus leaves the Capernaum home of Simon Peter and Andrew.ⁱ Yesterday and a million years ago, he began his ministry there,ⁱⁱ near the Sea of Galilee’s northern tip, calling his disciples from its shores. Now, he approaches Jerichoⁱⁱⁱ on his southward march, a turn toward Jerusalem he made on that lonesome, “high mountain”^{iv} of his Transfiguration. And all along this difficult way, the Pharisees haunt the rubble of his companions’ hopefulness, torment the vestiges of what prayers for safe passage he had dared in his own heart. Zealots claiming their moment’s power, these Pharisees plot to destroy Jesus, to try him with their meanness.^v

Bitten with these zealots’ poison, the querulous disciples do their bidding. Pulling their hoods tight above sunken eyes, they shield themselves from the sun’s glare; they regurgitate to Jesus the Pharisees’ testing questions;^{vi} they claw to preserve and advance their own status;^{vii} and they howl at the crowds, even those who approach Jesus sincerely.^{viii} The teacher responds to all this with grace and not intimidation: “Let the little children come to me;” he pleads, “for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”^{ix} Yet, in either frustration or exhaustion, he finally recites his *Bloody Mary ... Bloody Mary ... Bloody Mary*^x incantation for a third time, and “those who followed [him] *were afraid*,” the Gospel records.^{xi} For gathered around the campfire, Jesus hisses warning:

“[See], the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; [who] will mock him ... spit upon him ... flog him ... kill him[, and, yet,] after three days he will rise^{xii} ... [Indeed,] do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down ... [and] after that suffering, the sun will [darken,] the moon will not give its light[, and] the stars will fall [from a shaken heaven].”^{xiii}

The Prudential's central antenna reaches across the Boston Public Library and points toward the ruins of The Lenox, a bowing idol of stone and steel and milky glass. Inching out of its crooked shadow, we pull behind the remains of a burned-out construction van parked on the wrong side of Boylston at Dartmouth, and – *did we see that? ... was that real?* – sparks of orange blink inside the square windows of the van's rear doors.

We close our eyes and shake at the impossible image, when – again – we sense movement ... this time behind us. Instinctively, we dart our head, and we hear Old South's rusting bell moan. Long disgorged from its felled tower (bumped by the phantom on our flank?) and wobbling between a low step and the sidewalk, its clapper slowly rasps its lip: *kwuwwer-kweee ... kwuwwer-kweee*.

Opening our car door, a smell of sickness knocks us back into the driver's seat. With one hand to our mouth and nose, we paw above the sunvisor and find a package of aged COVID masks. Fitting two around our ears and tucking a third into our pocket, we gird ourselves and step out onto the curb.

The Copley Square before us is a muddy, fetid pool. The murky water, its surface shimmering with oily chemicals, moves in gentle waves by an unseen force, revealing and then swallowing the rounded shell of the tortoise, the tilted head and tall ear of the hare. We walk behind the disintegrating outline of the fountain and toward Trinity Church ... where nothing remains of the West Porch.

While most of what we have seen seems to have dilapidated and “returned to the earth,” Trinity's entrance appears precision cut just to the east of the West Gallery. There is no sign of the Porch's heavy wooden doors, or the blues and greens and small glass globes of John La Farge's masterwork. The statues and carvings that once stood sentinel there have marched to some new theater, the columns and the mural work ... *gone*.

We walk closer, and, peering inside, we realize the church's interior has been eviscerated, scraped clean from the towers to the undercroft like a terrible, emptied gourd. What remains of the stained-glass windows are jagged teeth along their lower sills. Twenty feet below us, pipes peek upright out of an ooze – a pink sludge moldering with rotted pew cushions^{xiv} and carpets and book bindings – those organ ranks a broken and bare rib cage breathing a faint and haunting death whistle.

Without warning, a cry splits the stale air – *the shriek of a blind wraith? the plea of a suffering spirit?* – “Son of David, have mercy on me!”^{xv}

Torn from the Halloween season's eerie scrolls, this is the way we *prefer* our zombie apocalypse. Whether a soul-cracking scene from Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*^{xvi} or Terry Gilliam's *12 Monkeys*,^{xvii} we need not know the cause of the devastations, so long as they are beyond our fault or fixing. These drive-in, double-feature, horror-movie visions offer a ghastly balm, a sour relief that – *finally* – all our angers, all our worries, all our pains, have given way to a conclusion we could neither have hastened nor halted. We take a nihilist's comfort in imagining such a future without Trinity Church, for that world is without *all* we hold fond or familiar, and, blessedly, we have no responsibility for any of it.

Trinitarians, realize that this pandemic looms as a potential extinction event for American Christianity as we in The Episcopal Church know it. After decades of decline in an increasingly secular society, the interruption of our common life threatens not our vitality, but our *viability* – our very existence. And we need not conjure make-believe monsters to ravage this future, for *we will have become the death-eaters*: apathetic ghouls who have chosen lethargy as our legacy, taking for granted our institutions – including this one – as though they will pulse into perpetuity by the blood and bone of those who bequeathed them and their promise to us.

Rather than a Trinity Church emptied by unholy revenants, these pandemic days will have anticipated a hellscape of self-absorption, one more like the dystopic visions of Biff Tannen's Hill Valley^{xviii} or George Bailey's Pottersville.^{xix} And along such an unbelieving Boylston, Trinity Church will have been cored by consumption – re-zoned for mixed-use, with luxury condominiums on the upper floors of the Parish House, and boutique shopping beneath ... this church outfitted as an auditorium, a godless space of spectacle selling talismans of sacred runes long-since forgotten, much less prayed or sung.

Can you imagine this kind of world without Trinity Church, without Beloved Communities stoking hope, sharing love, inspiring faith in the God of Resurrection?

These omens breathe hot and menacingly close ... yet God hopes a better future! Trinity Church hopes a better future! And if we share that brighter vision, *then we must pledge ourselves to it*. With all the generosity God hopes for the world, we must invest ourselves in the future *as we aspire it*.

Today at Trinity Church, we begin our 2022 Stewardship season, when we invite every household in our community to make a financial commitment for the upcoming year. We call this commitment a "pledge," and we view that covenant as a promise between us and the God of all creation. By this pledge, we invest in a movement greater than ourselves alone.

We resolve this devotion for the wellbeing of our soul and the soul of the cosmos. Therefore, we do not pledge to keep the church's columns upright or the organ sounding. Instead, we give because God calls us to give – because God has chosen the Church as the instrument of the world's salvation and asks us to partner in realizing God's great and glorious dream.

The near-term tension, of course, is that we must keep the church's lamps lit and fund the parish's ministry, for we spend only what we can afford, and we can afford to spend only what has been pledged and granted. Therefore, our invitation to Stewardship has two goals: individually, we pray that every member of this congregation will give faithfully; and, then, communally, we pray that – together! – we will provide for the ministry to which God calls us.

Now, this is that moment in the sermon when I would usually catalogue the needs and plans we have drafted for the coming year. I would make our strong case for each optimism – and, make no mistake, the cases are strong. We would pass the plate and let the momentum of custom and convenience carry us, giving what we usually give and trusting our neighbor to shoulder the rest. Well, friends, we no longer have the luxury of waiting even another moment – much less another year – to answer God's call to us, for these nightmares do not imperil only a few amenities of ministry, *but imperil the Church itself!* Even now, vampires and vultures gather at our threshold and wait for us to shrink away, to concede our faith and join their ranks of deconstructionist zealots, the self-righteous and the self-absorbed, the malevolent and the mocking.

With our love for one another, *let us break their spell!*

Let us throw off our cloaks, spring toward the risen Christ, and join in the healing of the world's despair!^{xx}

Let us answer joyfully our stewardship call, inspired by the One who reassures, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”^{xxi}

And let us fill this sanctuary with your love and generosity.

For the Life of the World to Come,
Amen.

ⁱ Mark 9:33, 10:1.

ⁱⁱ Mark 1:29.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark 10:46.

^{iv} Mark 9:2. “Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them to a high mountain apart, by themselves.”

^v Mark 10:2. “Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’”

^{vi} Mark 10:10. “Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter [of divorce].”

^{vii} Mark 9:34, 10:28, 10:37. “... they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.” Again: “Peter began to say to [Jesus], ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you.’” And again: “[James and John] said to [Jesus], ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.’”

^{viii} Mark 10:13, 10:48. “People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them.” And: “Many sternly ordered [Bartimaeus] to be quiet ...”

^{ix} Mark 10:14. Mark 10:31 continues the theme: "... but many who are first will be last"

^x [Turn off the bathroom lights and chant "Bloody Mary" thirteen times](#), and an apparition may appear in the mirror before clawing at your face!

^{xi} Mark 10:32.

^{xii} Mark 10:32-34.

^{xiii} Mark 13:2, 24-25. Bridged here a shade out of context, but in the spirit of the imagery.

^{xiv} Do note that I resisted mention of how these pew cushions are already rotting in our pews ...

^{xv} Mark 10:

^{xvi} "He knew only that the boy was his warrant. He said if he is not the word of God, then God never spoke." Without any close peer, the most "soul-cracking" book I have ever read: brilliant, beautiful, and devastating.

^{xvii} Back in 1995 when Gilliam released the film, 2035 (the time of the film's action) seemed a lot further away ...

^{xviii} [From Back to the Future II, 1989](#). Modest heart can be taken that Mr. Strickland's aggressors choose to make their mayhem perched in a 1969 Buick Skylark convertible. I will leave it to others to make note of the Biff Tannen-Donald Trump resonances.

^{xix} [From It's A Wonderful Life, 1946](#). Some clever soul (thank you, Interwebs) has even set the two films' futures side-by-side one another.

^{xx} Mark 10:50. "So throwing off his cloak, [Bartimaeus] sprang up and came to Jesus."

^{xxi} Mark 10:27.