

Building or Birthing: What is Our Legacy? By Holly C. W. Aastuen
November 22, 2009 Mark 13:1-8

It was one of those party questions that people like to spring on you when the conversation turns to deep and spiritual things. It's not a question you would be advised to use at, say, a bridal shower or the birthday party for a 5 year old. But in the context of this party with a group of people who had already wandered into topics of some depth, the question was asked: 'What would you do if you knew you only had one month to live?'

We've all thought about it. We sometimes ask ourselves those deep sorts of questions when a friend of ours goes into hospice or a young neighbor dies—What would you do if you knew you only had one month to live? That is, what do you find most essential, most soul-feeding that you would want to be sure and capture while you had the chance?

These sorts of questions get to the essentials of what we are about, about what we value and find sustaining in our lives. Whether the answer is to travel to someplace you've always wanted to go, or to gather all the extended family for a family reunion, or to tie up the loose ends of your life, our answer reflects our values and what we hold dear.

Knowing there is an immanent end to life gives us an intensity that we don't otherwise have—it focuses our attention on the essentials of life.

Today's scripture also pushes us to get to such essentials.

As today's reading begins, one of the disciples points to the Temple in awe and shares his amazement at the stonework. As Jesus talks about its destruction, the disciples want to know more specifics. But Jesus isn't concerned with specifics. He is trying to point them to what is essential. Even though things such as wars, famine and earthquakes will happen, what is essential is the birth pangs. Pay attention to the birth pangs. The birth pangs of what, you may ask? The birth pangs of what is to come.

Jesus is saying—stuff happens and people often use the stuff that is happening in the world around them to point to the end of the world. Jesus is saying, don't listen to them. Those people who say those things are paying attention to their own agenda, not God's. Those world events are not signs of the end of the world. He is asking them to pay attention to God's timing and not the timing of those who preach doomsday messages.

So what is God's timing? What is it that God is asking us to pay attention to?

One way to focus our attention on God's timing and God's agenda is to ask that party game question of the church as a whole, asking each place of worship—what would the congregation do if circumstances pushed us to focus on the essentials—what if our congregation only had one month to live? What would we do with our time, money and resources if we knew there was just a limited amount of time left? Just as that question about our personal lives pushes us to focus on what is essential, that sort of question in the context of a congregation would also focus our attention on what was essential to us.

So what is essential? What is the most important to us? Is it the building? Is it the organ and windows and pews that are the most valuable? Or is it the relationships that we would miss the most—the memories, the connections, the love and support? Or to get at it another way, which would you be willing to give up first—the building or the people? Most of us would say that church is more about relationships and ministry than it is about bricks and mortar. The

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church is not a building, it is the people. Jesus didn't come to earth so that we could have structures that would never fail, he came so that we would have eternal relationships with God and with one another.

So how would we behave differently if we knew that time was short? If we knew that we had only a limited time together I think we'd be more intentional about how we used our resources. We'd spend more time thinking about what our legacy might be and how other people's lives might change because of the resources entrusted to us.

We would identify what was really important to the people of Aldersgate and put our focus on that. What would we do? Would we start a new ministry? Support scholarships? Build a youth center? Build a homeless shelter? Where would our passion lie? Where would our money go?

And why would that focus be different if we knew we would exist as a congregation forever? Why is it hard to focus our stewardship when we have more than a few months to live?

Granted, it is impractical to live as if you had only a very short time to live. For one thing it would be extremely wearing to live with such gusto. For another, there are long term practical matters like paying the electric bill and making long term investments—practical matters that one would no doubt neglect if you had only a short time to live.

But taking time to step back and consider what is truly important is a good exercise to practice every once in a while. What is truly important to you? What is truly important to us?

Obviously we have to do both—live in the present with the practical and often mundane tasks of daily living AND focus on the future and imagine what could be.

As we look to the future we feel some of the birth pangs of the coming of God's realm. We realize that this still is not a perfect world and that the mission field is all around us, waiting to learn about God's love for them. In a day and time when only 17 percent of the nation is worshipping in a congregation on any given Sunday, we wait and wonder about where God will be calling us next.

This day, this Dedication Day, is a day that we are given the gift of hopes and dreams for the future. What are our dreams for the future ministries through Aldersgate?

A volunteer tutor was asked to visit a nine-year-old in a large city hospital. She took the boy's name and room number and was told by the boy's teacher that they were studying nouns and adverbs in class. It wasn't until the tutor got to the boy's room that she realized that the boy was a patient in the hospital's burn unit. No one had prepared her to find a nine-year-old so horribly burned and in such great pain. She felt she couldn't just turn and leave, so gathered her courage and entered the room. "Hi, I'm the hospital teacher," she stammered. "Your teacher asked me to help you with nouns and adverbs." And, clumsily, she launched into the lesson.

The next morning a nurse called the tutor. "What did you do to that boy?" The tutor immediately began a tearful apology, but the nurse interrupted her, "No, no. You don't understand. We've been very worried about him. But since you were here, he's fighting back, he's responding to treatment. It's as though he's decided to live."

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The boy later explained that he had given up hope, until the tutor arrived. He said, "I figured that they wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a kid who's dying, would they?" ("Hope in the active voice," Connections, Solemnity of Christ the King, Nov. 1998)

On this Dedication Day we invest in our future as a congregation. We hope and we dream and we say 'yes' to all that is to come. We affirm that God knew what God was doing when Aldersgate people were planted in this place at this time and we affirm that we will continue to shine with God's light and do the things that God is calling us to do. We are being asked to bring about God's agenda, which is the reign and realm of God.

How can we say 'yes' to anything less?

Mark 13:1-8

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!"² Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

³ When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴ "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?"⁵ Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁶ Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. ⁷ When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. ⁸ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.