Worship – Sheri L. Harris

First Presbyterian Church

Battle Creek, Michigan

November 15, 2020

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth! Serve the Lord with gladness!

Come into God’s presence with singing! Know that it is God who made us, and we are God’s people and the sheep of God’s pasture. Enter God’s gates with thanksgiving and God’s courts with praise!

Give thanks to God; bless God’s name! For God is good;

God’s steadfast love endures forever, and God’s faithfulness to all generations.—**Psalm 100**

**Greetings! I am Sheri Harris and it is an honor to be “home” here in Battle Creek where I was born and raised. Thank you for the opportunity to join you in worship today. It is always a joy to drive into this city and remember the great love I have for it.**

**I bring greetings from Bethany Presbyterian Church in Gobles, Michigan, where I am Commissioned as Pastor, and also from First Presbyterian Church in Holland, where I work as support staff as well.**

Sermon

“In the Meantime Between Time”

Mark 13:1-8

Psalm 16

Hear these words from scripture and prepare your hearts.

**Psalm 16**

#### **A *miktam*[**[**a**](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2016&version=NIV#fen-NIV-14094a)**] of David.**

**1** Keep me safe, my God, for in you I take refuge.

**2** I say to the Lord, “You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing.”

**3** I say of the holy people who are in the land, “They are the noble ones in whom is all my delight.”

**4** Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more. I will not pour out libations of blood to such gods or take up their names on my lips.

**5** Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure.

**6** The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance.

**7** I will praise the Lord, who counsels me;

 even at night my heart instructs me.

**8** I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken.

**9** Therefore, my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure,

**10** because you will not abandon me to the realm of thedead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay.

**11** You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

### **The Destruction of the Temple and Signs of the End Times**

 **13** As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!”

**2** “Do you see all these great buildings?” replied Jesus. “Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”

**3** As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately,

**4** “Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?”

**5** Jesus said to them: “Watch out that no one deceives you.

**6** Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many.

**7** When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.

**8** Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.

The Word of the Lord

Please pray with me

May the words of my mouth and the meditations on all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

During my time in seminary, as part of my studies, I had the incredible opportunity to travel to and through Israel Palestine. It still seems unreal as I recall it today.

I walked where Jesus walked and asked questions of my teachers and peers in some of the places where folks were asking questions of Jesus. Unbelievable!

I have sat on the Mount of Olives and admired the temple from that perch over the Kidron Valley. I have touched these great buildings and I too wondered...What? How? And when?

I share this because...As I read this scripture, if I’m HONEST, I can feel a smirk or quiet laugh inspired by great emotion from my memories welling up in my chest. I have been to this temple, to this place and I wish you could go too.

Can I tell you about it?

Well, get this…when you walk in, you first come to these ruins that would blow your mind. They are huge, MASSIVE, and they are ancient, old as time itself it might seem...and they have been worked over and over through the years. You can see where the layers of construction have been laid over and over again. There is also this weird buzz of energy. Likely it’s Holy energy, as the many feet who have walked those roads and paths and pounded down the earth to what it is now can be imagined. And the heavy prayers they yelled, cried, rejoiced and sighed feel like they could still be echoing across the great divide in Jerusalem.

OH, and the many voices and declarations of war can be faintly heard…if you have enough imagination.

So many great minds and bodies, Biblical GIANTS and religious people who made their mark and wrote our books of their memories over all time, THEY TOO were present right in this place. Well, friends, if you think hard enough about them, you’ll just be flat overwhelmed.

These places remain, in some ways, as described in the book that we love. This temple is a holy place of God, it is sacred. It was the place where the Jews, like Jesus, laid their hope and faith down in the presence of God.

Look, then, as you wander into what appears to be just ruins, the landscape starts to take shape and you come through check points and guards to the temple mount. It’s as magnificent in size and structure as you would imagine.

This place is known by the Jewish people as the Mount of the House of God. This place is also known and honored by the Muslim people, who call it the Nobel Sanctuary, as it is the third holiest place for the Islamic tradition. Here is where you find the Dome of the Rock.

The Temple Mount may be accessed by anyone, but entry to the Dome of the Rock is restricted to Muslims. Though there are multiple gates to access the site, non-Muslims must enter through a gate located near the Western Wall plaza. Israeli security controls the entry points.

Beyond all of that you come to the Wailing Wall or Western Wall. You see, because of the Temple Mount entry restrictions, the Wall has become the holiest place where Jews are permitted to pray, even though the Foundation Stone, the most sacred site in the Jewish faith, lies behind it.

As I could go on and on, I imagine you asking yourself…Why is she telling us all this?

Well, friends, upon entry it was clear that as Christians, especially as American Christians, WE were welcomed guests by these people of differing faith traditions.

Regardless of where Jewish people can or cannot go or where Muslim people can or cannot go, Christians flow easily through these spaces and places. There are restrictions, however, on how we dress, what we touch, avoiding male and female encounters, as well as demonstrating cautious and respectful behavior, of course.

As seminarians, lovers of the Gospel, we all wandered through with wide eyes and deep reverence. Eventually, as humans often do, we started to really wonder…where do we fit here? Where is Christianity’s place in the midst of all this history and tradition?

Well, our guided tour director, a wise scholar and remarkable man, led us to what I’ll always remember as “our” place. The place where the stones have fallen.

It was there that we found ourselves.

We sat down, and we stayed there for a while to take it all in. We stared at the great walls. In awe, we took in the history, culture, and tradition. We whispered and nervously laughed and openly expressed our thoughts and feelings of all we had seen on our way to this place.

Eventually, we read scripture to remember ourselves to this place. We read this scripture I read here today.

Some of us wept over the overwhelming tension between all of these folks. Some of us wept over the history and the scandal of it all, for sure. Some of us wept over the shared experience of ruins and rocks and rubble that our lives, even as people of faith, sometimes seem to become.

So here we are, back at Mark 13, and this Preacher that stands before you today tells you all this and still says she nearly laughs when she reads the inquiry of this scripture from Peter, James, John and Andrew asking Jesus privately, **4**“Tell us, when will these things happen?”

Friends, the laugh is more nervous than anything. You see I feel emotions welling up inside me as I reflect on this promise of Jesus, “Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”

I saw for myself the ruins. Some were thrown down...but some still remain.

OOOf, I wonder how that made them feel?

Can you **even** imagine what Peter, James, John and Andrew would think if I told them that today? In November of the year 2020, the stones have fallen, but not completely. And we are still very much here, probably in some similar situations they were in back then when they had that conversation!

There is still conflict. There is still oppression. There is still war and famine, neighbor against neighbor, religious people dueling with words, sometimes quite harshly, treating each other terribly. The temple they loved is clearly divided. The temple wars, which were fought for and against, stand divided into different traditions and restrictions. AND, Jesus hasn’t returned yet! What?

What If I told Peter, James, John and Andrew (if they don’t already know by some great divine mystery) about the chaos and commotion that has happened since they left this earth? What if I told them what we, people calling ourselves Christ followers, were up to today? Can you imagine?

Here they are. Jesus is physically present with them and, not too unlike us, they want to know the time and place.

They want to know the who, what, when, where and why. They want some kind of sign.

I imagine, just like us, they would feel frustrated, uninspired, angry and overwhelmed and they just NEED ANSWERS! Even if the answers were given to them privately and not to everyone, I bet they would at least feel entitled to that much.

AHHH, alas, when it comes to the mystery of God and the return of Jesus Christ, there are truly more questions that arise than answers. Thank God we have the scriptures to help us stay the course anyway.

Jesus said to them: “Watch out that no one deceives you. **6** Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many. **7** When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. **8** Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.

No time frame was given except, “These are the beginning.” It’s just even more expectation. Like I said before, more questions than answers.

Let me share it again right from Mark 13, “These are the beginning of birth pains.”

Some biblical imagery can be difficult to understand or grasp. To Peter, James, John and Andrew, though, the idea of this temple falling, (friends, I have to share that the bricks of those structures are, in some places, bigger than a semitruck and more dense than anything you can comprehend) illustrates they know how radical this concept Jesus speaks of really is. I just bet they have a good idea what it would take for those rocks to fall! Of course, the way in which people are born into this world has not changed, so they must understand the birth pains, even if they never experienced them for themselves.

Even we can come to an understanding regarding these birth pains and time frame.

I myself have three sons. Those three boys were born and raised right here in Battle Creek, Michigan. We lived here until 2015 when I uprooted our family and moved to Holland, Michigan so I could attend seminary.

I mention my sons to say this: Giving birth can be quite a long, difficult and painful process. Oftentimes, giving birth can be quite time consuming and even unpredictable.

Once the pregnancy begins there is this period of expectation and acceptance that a new life will be entering this world. After that realization comes the preparation for the birth of that child.

A whole nine months of anticipation is spent making sure the baby goes to full term, is healthy and safe. This anticipation and preparation eventually leads up to birth pains.

Once the birth pains begin, there is this wild and amazingly intense ride of both feeling completely ready and completely unprepared. You move from wanting the pains to start to desperately wanting them to end!

My first son, Elijah, came six weeks too early. The doctors and nurses tried to stop my labor because he was so early. It was absolutely agonizing. However, Elijah was already making his grand entrance and nothing could stop him.

Too soon.

When it came time for my second son, Noah, to be born, he was too late. He wasn’t ready or willing to come into this world peacefully. At a whole 9 pounds, that baby boy was content in my womb, and my body was quite content with keeping him there. My birth pains just wouldn’t start; but when they did, my son was born so quickly I can hardly remember what all happened.

Too late.

My third son, Micah, came along three years later. Oddly enough, he was right on time. His was a scheduled birth, an induction, for more careful monitoring of the baby.

On time.

Too early, too late and right on time.

Well, why is Jesus using this imagery of the beginning of birth pains when talking about knowing the time frame or understanding the signs of the end of the age?

Well, it's not just the birth pains. In plain language, Jesus tells his disciples what to expect when life as we know it comes to and end when Jesus returns.

Maybe even more so because we should prepare, like birth pains, Jesus may come early. He may come late. But quite likely, in the Divine order of things, He...will…come...right on time.

Friends, the best we can do, like our Biblical friends James, John, Andrew and Peter is to make peace with the fact that we won’t know when that is...we don’t get to know.

So now what? What do we do in the meantime and between time?

Well, I am merely the messenger; but I would say, above all else, we must fully engage in the preparation, just like Peter, James, John and Andrew had to do.

 How do we prepare?

God may not have given us a date and time, but God has provided us with plenty of information about preparation for sure.

I came across this excellent quote by J. D. Walt, an author, poet and theologian, “Being prepared means staying vigilant, alert and expectant. It means cultivating a lifestyle of attentiveness to the presence of God in all things. It does not mean an anxiety-ridden fretting away of the present while looking ahead to the future. To be attentive is to live completely, wholeheartedly and joyfully alive to the Father, abiding in the life of Jesus through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Now, breathe that in. Wholeheartedly. Joyfully alive. Abide, abide, abide.

I know, I know. In the time of pandemic it can be hard to get too excited about “fully living” because most, if not all of us, are doing every last thing we can do to simply STAY alive let alone get back to the business of fully living.

Ok, I get that...but I can’t help but wonder if we can look to our old testament reading for today, Psalm 16, to see if we can find more information, some answers to our questions about our preparation, living fully for what is to come, and our preparation for the return of Jesus, our preparation for a new Pastor, a preparation for discerning how we are blessed to be a blessing in the season of stewardship.

Let’s take this journey together.

First, I can tell you that Psalm 16, is titled, “A Michtam of David.” The title “Michtam” is commonly understood as golden; others think it is related to a word meaning, “to cover.” Since the Psalms with this title (Psalm 16, 56-60) are written from times of peril, some think the idea is of covering the lips in the sense of secrecy (finger to lips), as if this were a secret or silent psalm given in a time of crisis. Well, let’s get this secret out here. Let’s reveal it because, hey God’s people, we have crises too, don’t we? We feel peril, too, sometimes, don’t we?

Well, how interesting that this Psalm 16 is a wonderful song relating how David found the secret of contentment and great gladness, even in pressing times; it also **powerfully** predicts Jesus and His work for us.

### **Hear again these words from Psalm 16**

#### **A *miktam*[**[**a**](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2016&version=NIV#fen-NIV-14094a)**] of David.**

**1 “Keep me safe, O God, for in you I take refuge.”**

Believers, take refuge in God, for only God will keep you safe. At a time of such unrest around these United States and the Globe, God is your only true refuge. Take what is yours for safety’s sake.

**2 “I say to God, You are my God; apart from you I have no good thing.”**

We remember who we are and whose we are as we prepare, as we wait, as we navigate.

 **3 “I say of the holy people who are in the land, They are the noble ones in whom is all my delight.”**How good and comforting it is to know that God continues to delight in the mess we are and the messes we make. Friends,you are delightful in God’s sight!

 **4 “Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more. I will not pour out libations of blood to such gods or take up their names on my lips.”**

This part is easy, well...easy-ER. Stay focused, God’s people. Don’t let your minds and your hearts turn to other things for comfort or consolation. Your only consolation is through the power of the Holy Spirit, in Christ Jesus. Worship no othergod, not the god of war, the god of money, the god of politics, the god of substance abuse, the god of red, the god of blue.

There is but one true God, regardless of how you name yourCreator. That...is Gospel...and Amen!

 **5 “Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure.”**

Ahhh, security. Don’t we all desire to have security? We begfor it. We fight for it. We call for it. We spend much of our day seeking it. Rest, people of God, because God alone is your place, your portion and your cup. Put God first in your life, and you will see your lot much more secure.

 **6 “The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance. “**Remember our boundaries. Remember our inheritance.

 **7 “I will praise the Lord, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me.”**

Oh, let us never forget to praise God and remember that darkness does not always mean desolate. God created theworld from darkness. God is never nearer to you than in the darker days, or at night. Listen to God as God turns your heart to the things of God as you mumble your bedtime prayers in the still of the night.

 **8 “I keep my eyes always on God. With God at my right hand, I will not be shaken.”**

Do not be shaken, good people. Keep your eyes on God.Keep your eyes on God. Keep your eyes on God. Keep your eyes on God. We may not know when the difficult times might show up or when the world will be made right, but we know in the end we are with God and in God. At God’s right and left hand, there we too will be. Do not be shaken, good people. Stay the course and stay committed in your plans to do the next right thing when we feel overwhelmed by the whole of the scene before us.

 **9 “Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure.”** Be glad, rejoice, rest secure.

 **10 “Because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay.**

God will never abandon you. Keep your mind focused on thatand not on the decay. Be faithful and true and God will comethrough for you.

 **11 “You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal**

 **pleasures at your right hand.**

The path of life is long and at times difficult. Our JOY comes from our God. Eternal pleasures are wild and wonderful without fail. Do not let fear overcome you, Church people. Let the feelings of hopelessness and helplessness pass. Remember yourselves to the time and place and take your seat near God’s teachers, preachers, and friends. Hear the words of God’s foes with a light heart knowing God is always in control, without fail even when it seems that may not be so. Forgive, forgive, forgive. Embrace your role in this time and space, and usher in whatever happens next bravely and fully equipped. You see, if you STAY ready, church people,you never have to GET ready. Amen.

Charge

If anything I have said in the sermon today tickled you or ticked you off, I’m here for that. Know that leaders here at First Presbyterian Church of Battle Creek can feel free to give out my contact information, for you to reach out and ask me your questions or tell me your stories or let me know how this message was received by you. You can also find me on Facebook. This year has been a long and difficult one and we have only just begun on this new leg of our race.

Know that regardless of where you are in your life of faith and relationship with God, if you are somewhere between strong and steady or weak and withdrawing, I promise you that God is calling to you right now.

You are more than welcome to enter into and remain in the peace that passes all understanding, the peace that comes to you from your very creator, a loving God who fights with and for you...and even sometimes fights you in your worst intentions.

The bottom line is no matter who you are or where you are from, your income, race, gender or background...YOU precious Child of God, ARE blessed to be a blessing.

Together, We WILL find new and creative ways to be together, stay together and support one another. After all, for such a time as this...well, this is really what the Church was created for.

And now, go out into the world in peace...