

**November 19,2006**  
**33<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**Brentwood 1<sup>st</sup> Presbyterian**  
**“Our response to God’s favor”**

**Introduction**

Today is a good day. We celebrate 4 firsts today. It is the day that Doak and Leah are joining our church in its mission. Lorie and Frank did excellent jobs as pulpit supply, and I hope they will continue to help, but this is the first day in a long time you have had an ordained pastor committed to 46 Sundays a year. It is my first Sunday to preach as an ordained pastor. I thank you for calling me. And finally, today begins a 6 sermon series on growing the spirituality of a small church, our church. Our primary texts for this series are going to be the Advent Gospel lectionary for this year, and for background, our secondary text will be from Nehemiah. Nehemiah is one of the historical texts of the Hebrew Bible. Nehemiah’s claim to fame is that he rebuilt the Jerusalem Temple after Israel’s return from Babylon.

**Mark 13:1-8, Nehemiah 2:17-20**

**sequence 1**

Semantic - No edifice of humankind is permanent. Only our hearts are permanent.

Scriptural - Can you see the temple through their eyes? Jesus and his first disciples have a dramatic view. From the Kidron valley below, they look up to see the tremendous white marble stones of the Temple, overlaid with a gold veneer. Some of the columns are 30 feet in height, and some of the foundation stones are 10 feet high and 40 feet long. Mortar was not necessary because some of them weighed in at 500 tons. The temple was 200 yards in length, and 50 yards in width. The temple wall towered 150 feet above Jerusalem. The temple stood high upon Mount Zion, and on a clear day you could see it forever. Can you see the Temple as Jesus and his first disciples saw it? The disciples say

something almost humorous, like people who have never been outside rural Galilee.

**“Look, teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!”** Then Jesus stuns them.

He is always doing that. He asks them, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." Jesus' shocking words quote the prophet Jeremiah, who foretold the destruction of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem 600 years earlier. Now Jesus says it is going to happen again.

But the people of Jesus' Jerusalem do not want to hear about the passing of the old ways, any more than did the people of Jeremiah's Jerusalem. People do not like being told inconvenient truths, and they do not like change. **It is said only a baby with dirty diapers likes a change. And I am not even sure babies like to be changed.**

Cultural – I majored in biology at Auburn. I did not get a liberal arts degree. I got a Bachelor's of Science degree. But I do not remember a single chemistry 101 class. I do remember every single minute of my English literature class. Percy Bysshe Shelley's most famous short poem deals with a number of great themes, including arrogance and transience. Listen to Shelley's poem:

*I met a traveler from an antique land*

*Who said:—Two vast and trunkless legs of stone*

*Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,*

*Half sunk, ... on a pedestal these words appear:*

*"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:*

*Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"*

*Nothing beside remains: round the decay*

*Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

Theosymbolic – King Solomon builds the first Temple foundation, and Nebuchadnezzar destroys. Nehemiah and King Herod rebuild Solomon’s Temple foundation, and the Roman legions destroy. But Jesus changes all that. Jesus tells us in Mark chapter 13 about a new foundation, not built of stones. And a much firmer foundation it is. As the song writer says, “A foundation laid for our faith in God’s excellent Word!” The Spirit of God no longer is centered in the City of Jerusalem or in the Temple. God’s new dwelling place is in the human heart. The heart of each person who trusts in God, and who answers God's call. God’s call to live outside our comfort zone. Apostle Paul writes, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?" The focus of the New Covenant in Christ is not in buildings or in living in the survival mode. The new focus is God living not in buildings but in our hearts. God loves you. And you respond to God’s love. Your response is to live not in your familiar and comfortable places, but to live outside our comfort zone. As the song writer says, the Almighty now rules in every heart who trusts in God.

## **sequence 2**

Semantic - The voice of complacency leads us astray.

Scriptural - Jesus said to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray." Jesus calls his first disciples into discernment. He challenges them, and challenges us today, to think and to act. **After all, Jesus did not come to save us from our minds.** The tradition and history of Christ's church is about change and growth. Not change for change's sake, but change for the purpose of the growth of Christ's body, the church. Yes, transformation is hard work. But miracles do happen in congregations that transform. One of my professors

suggests the vision of changing into a new way of being is what propelled zealous first century Christians into the rapid growth of their religion. What do we mean by a new way of being?

Cultural – As I said, I majored in biology at Auburn. One of the exciting things to me about biology is transformation. Transformation of a tadpole into a frog. Of a seed into a flower. Of a caterpillar into a butterfly. If someone told you that the same caterpillar which enters a cocoon or chrysalis emerges without change, you know this is not true. No, the truth is that the caterpillar changes its skin and undergoes transformation. The caterpillar's body completely reorganizes itself into a new being. The body of the butterfly emerges equipped to live a life quite different from a caterpillar. Its wings unfold, and full of grace it flies into the light. No longer bound by the limitations of its past, it is free to soar to new heights.

Theosymbolic – Likewise, you and I are led astray if we are told that Christianity is a cross-less religion. Without cost. Without discipleship. Without tears. The original 12 are Jesus' first disciples. We, you and I, are Jesus disciples now. And we are called to sacrifice. We are called, as the song writer says, to “bear the heavy cross.” Maybe not with your and my death, but at least with our time and energy. God’s “Spirit of holiness and restlessness descends upon us.” And “stirs us from placidness. God's Spirit calls us from tomorrow to break ancient routines. With bold new decisions, God's Spirit calls us to rise.” Transformation is not working harder, faster, or smarter in the same old direction. Transformation is about change and challenge, leaving the past and looking ahead. We are baptized into Jesus' death as well as his resurrection. As Apostle Paul says,

"Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of God, so we too might walk in newness of life."

### **sequence 3**

Semantic - The end is not yet. Later. But not yet.

Scriptural - "The end is still to come. ... This is but the beginning of the birth pangs."

Endings and beginnings. Beginnings and endings. Ending of the old ways and beginning of the new. Jesus invites you to be hopeful. The chaos in which a faithful church may find itself is the beginning of birth pangs.

Cultural – Let's talk about birth pain for a minute. I have done over 5000 bone marrows in my career as an oncologist and hematologist. Bone marrow biopsies are sometimes needed to stage cancer or to tell physicians why a blood count is low or high. I have noticed that the pain threshold of women is a lot higher than that of men. Women do not need as much anesthetic as men do when I do a bone marrow biopsy. **Yes, you heard me.** I think this is because unlike most men, women have experienced real pain before. The pain of child birth. The suffering of a mother before she gives birth to new life. But even at labor's peak, pain does not eliminate joy and hope. After birth, pain disappears, and the mother is left with joy.

Theosymbolic - Like child birth, bearing the heavy cross of discipleship heralds an end. But not the end of life. "Watching and waiting, looking above. Filled with God's goodness, lost in God's love." The end of a long time of waiting and the coming of new life. Bearing the heavy cross of Jesus, bearing the heavy cross of discipleship, leads not to despair, but to hope. To the hoped for dawn of God's new creation. God loved you first, before you are even born. God loves you, and your response is sacrificial discipleship. You die to self and are reborn to a new creation.

## **Conclusion**

Stone walls and trunkless legs of stone. Spirit of restlessness and butterflies. Birth pangs and endings; hope and beginnings.

Paul writes, "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Quite a challenge isn't it? To allow God to transform your heart and mind, so that you can recognize and do the perfect will of God. "Perfect submission gives way to perfect delight. And visions of rapture now burst on your sight."

Glory be to God. Hallelujah and Amen.