

Mark's gospel reads like an action movie, complete with special effects and chase scenes. It puts James Bond to shame. And it should – this gospel was meant to be heard - told around the dinner table, in a fishing boat waiting for the wind to rise, on the road to the next town.

But here in today's gospel reading, in the bustle and noise of the temple courtyard, the pace of the story suddenly stops, and Jesus sits.

He sits and watches.

He watches the widow drop her two coins in the collection box, he listens to the sound those two coins make against the metal as they drop.

He sits and his eyes follow the great stones of the temple wall as they rise to the sky.

His disciples, not quite sure what to do about this suddenly quiet and pensive Jesus, follow his gaze to the stones - each one taller than they were.

"Look teacher," they say, "What great stones these are; what wonderful buildings!" This holy space where God dwelled. This holy space - the apex of all they believed, the container of their most vital practices. The greatness of these buildings surely reflected the glory of God, and God's chosen people.

But Jesus responds not with admiration, but disdain. "You see these stones... all of them? Not one stone will be left - all of it will all be torn down."

Suddenly, their triumphal entry into Jerusalem seems hollow and uncertain; fear is in their voices; "When will this happen? What kind of warning will we have? How can we escape this?"

Jesus' response doesn't calm their fears. "Many will come in my name, but don't believe them," he says. "There will be wars, and rumors of war, nations will rise up against each other, famines and earthquakes - but all this is only the beginning.."

Not exactly comforting.

The temple, begun by Herod the Great, had taken over 50 years to build. Its commanding presence spoke of the power of Rome, even in Judea. But Jesus knew of the deep problems that were built into the foundations of the whole temple complex.

It attempted to bring together Jewish worship and Roman power. It attempted to combine the Roman practice of daily offerings to the gods, particularly the emperor, and Jewish worship of the one and only God. It attempted to reconcile the ruthless practice of Roman rule, and the fundamental Jewish belief in social justice, especially for the poor and outcast.

Temple practices looked like they honored Jewish law. The compromise between Rome and the Jewish religious leaders were that daily sacrifices were offered; not to the emperor but for the emperor.

Wealth flowed into the temple through these spiritually bankrupted practices. The beauty of the temple masked Rome's unquenchable hunger for power, wealth, and control.

The poor, like the widow and her two coins, gave all they had to keep the violence of Rome at bay - and Rome as well as the Jewish religious authorities grew wealthy and powerful.

It is easy, very easy to succumb to the lure of power, and who doesn't want to keep violence away?

We, too, work hard to distance ourselves from pain and violence – but violence is always there. We watched Paris in horror this week, and that attack followed attacks in Beirut and Chad.

But it is not only these big, overwhelming acts of violence that frighten and harm us, the small ones hurt, too. When someone cuts you off, or yells at you; when someone you trusted turns against you; when you are threatened or bullied – the cumulative damage can be great. Children who live in high crime neighborhoods exhibit the same signs of PTSD as soldiers returning from the battlefields.

We live with anxiety. We live in calamity mode, and we try all sorts of things to keep pain, and violence, and fear away.

We numb ourselves. We disengage and distance ourselves. We blame, we deflect, we minimize things so that we can control.

My favorite over the last couple of weeks has been this. (Hold up red Starbucks beverage cup.) You may not have heard, but this year Starbucks has decided that these will be their cups for the holiday season. They are simple – red cups with the green Starbucks logo. In the past they have had some seasonal designs on the cups; I believe it was a snowflake design over the red last year.

Some people have had quite a reaction to this online. They believe Starbucks is persecuting Christians and trying to “end” Christmas because they don't have any Christmas symbols on the cups.

At first, I thought it was a joke, but, no, some people really believe this is yet another example of Christians being persecuted in this country. Really! If they want to talk about persecution, they should talk to Syrian Christians.

Then I realized this red cup and all its controversy is yet another example of how hard we work to keep the pain and violence away. We don't have to think about Syrian Christians, or refugees, or bombs outside our restaurants, because we are dealing with our own persecution crisis right here!

We may keep the darkness away, but, at the same time, we will also keep out the light.

What can we do to inoculate ourselves from all that keeps us from being who God has called us to be? How should we then live?

I keep a wooden plaque in my home. I keep it where I will see it every day. On it is a saying that reads: All great change is preceded by chaos.

The destruction of that great temple where Jesus sat gave rise to Christianity, and many scholars believe it also gave rise to a practice of Judaism that has allowed it to thrive to this day.

I am not condoning violence – never- but when we engage in the needs of the world instead of curling up in fear, great change is possible.

Because we are enough – more than enough. We are beloved children of God – just the way we are. We were not made to be small.

How do we do this?

I believe we live courageously out of that love. The antidote to fear and violence comes in three parts: Love God, love your neighbor, love yourself. This three part instruction comes not just from Jesus; it is the foundation of God's relationship to God's people. It's found in the very earliest books in the Bible.

Loving God is all about nurturing a relationship with God. We nurture any relationship in our lives by spending time together, by forming deep roots from conversation, laughter, silence, and work together.

Finding those moments for relationship is not easy in this busy world, especially with God. This awesome partner of ours doesn't text or call. We have to step outside our routines, outside of the business demanded by our culture and develop new ways, practices, to build this relationship.

A wonderful place to begin is the practice of gratitude. What if we each began every day – before we even get out of bed – by listing five things we were grateful for? Then every time throughout the day when we were frustrated, angry, hurt, or frightened, we listed two or three or five more? I know people who keep a gratitude list. It has changed their lives.

Another way into relationship with God is carving out a few moments to practice quieting our souls – maybe through silence, maybe through music, maybe through prayer. And, guess what- there's an app for that! There are lots of online resources. My favorite is through the Jesuits at Loyola Press. It's called the 3 Minute retreat. 3 minutes and my day can be reoriented to God. It's even available for your phone as well! 3 minutes several times a day, and my whole day becomes God focused.

Loving others – Since Old Testament times loving others has consisted of a two part process of kindness and justice. Acts of kindness reflect God's overwhelming love for us; these are acts given without thought of whether or not they are deserved, they are not acts that are measured, and, according to scripture, they are acts which form relationship or community. For example, if I serve meals at a shelter without making eye contact or conversation, I have not done an act of kindness, I have only fed my own ego.

I am a great believer in random acts of kindness. Thomas Merton, Trappist monk and author, once wrote of an experience he had of God on a busy street in Louisville. He described it as if God had grabbed him up by the collar, shook him, and set him back down. He saw his surroundings in a whole new way. "I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers....There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun." Random acts of kindness reorient our world to look a whole lot more like the Kingdom of God.

The second part of loving others is justice. Justice has a focus on righting the larger systemic failures that prevent people from living into all that God calls them to be. Ending the poverty to prison pipeline, working on all the issues related to homelessness, advocating for increased and appropriate

mental health service – all of these are acts of justice. It is important to note that we are called to both kindness and justice as we love others. They are inseparable.

The last of the three is loving ourselves. This is often a hard one for us. We feel it's selfish, we feel we should serve others first. We feel we are not being good Christians if we think of ourselves.

But this is God's directive to us. Love yourself.

I think it's helpful to consider what loving ourselves really means. It is not about indulgence, it's about doing what we need to become all that God dreams for us. We often get to the point of indulgence when we are desperately in need of nurturing because we haven't taken care of ourselves.

Think about this for a moment. What do you need to do to become all that God dreams for you?

It is different for each of us. Maybe you need to sleep in a couple of times a week. Maybe you need to go for a walk, maybe your soul needs to be among the red and gold fall leaves right now. Maybe you need to hear the sound of the waves. Maybe you need to play. Play allows your brain to make new connections – new thoughts, new ideas.

Is there someone you haven't called in a while? Maybe just because you have been busy. Call that person, rebuild that connection. We're healthier when we have a supportive group of people in our lives. Think about this today – what do you need to do to love yourself?

How should we live in this often scary, violent, painful world?

Be bold – do not let fear keep you small.

Love deeply, and live abundantly.

You are a beloved child of God. You.

