

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost for Celtic Service

Mark 13:1-8

November 15, 2015

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Joe was a young, green, naval aviator flying his first real bombing run on the morning of October 23, 1943. Stationed in the South Pacific, his squadron had instructions to bomb a Japanese airstrip on one of the Solomon Islands.

As the enemy airstrip came into sight, Joe felt the exhilaration of finally having the chance to prove himself and the dread fear that a Japanese Zero might at any moment materialize from behind one of the peaceful cumulus clouds that floated beside his plane.

Just seconds before Joe planned to pull the bomb lever, his plane shuttered from the impact of a Japanese anti-aircraft shell. Smoke quickly engulfed the cockpit as Joe screamed into the intercom for his radioman and gunner to jump. Feeling his ankles being seared by fire, Joe pushed himself out of the careening plane.

When his parachute opened, Joe remembers feeling as though he had been grabbed by the hand of God. As he drifted toward the enemy airstrip below, he wondered how this nightmare could've happened to him. He anticipated the end at any moment as he rocked himself back and forth to make himself a poorer target for enemy gunfire. Joe said goodbye to his mother, his father and his fiancé, Mary, and asked God to have mercy on him.

The next thing he knew a west wind was blowing him away from the airstrip, and his parachute caught in the branches of a tall tree. Grateful to be alive, he lowered himself to the jungle floor and scampered for cover.

For the next five days, Joe searched for food and the coast. Unsuccessful and by now weak and sick, he was finally captured by Japanese soldiers. Joe would spend most of the next two years in a Japanese POW camp. Of the 63 Allied servicemen in the camp when Joe arrived, only six would survive to be liberated at the end of the war. Joe was one of the fortunate ones. He married Mary, raised two children, enjoyed grandchildren and lived happily into his 90's. Joe was a dear friend of our family.

I tell this story tonight in honor of all our veterans like Joe we remembered last week and because his story speaks to the fragility of life Jesus alludes to in our gospel lesson.

The tragic terrorist attacks in France Friday night remind us that at any moment, personal, national or global realities can be disrupted and altered. The seemingly solid foundations of our

lives, like large stones, can be thrown down. Buildings, institutions, primary relationships, plans, careers and computers can all crash.

Looking at the long view of history, the only constants are impermanence and God. Jesus warns his disciples of tumultuous times that lay ahead – the Temple’s destruction, wars, earthquakes and famines. These continue in our own times and daily produce victims all around our world.

Jesus also calls them “the beginning of the birth pangs.” We know that birth pangs are temporary and result in a glorious new creation. Only through our trust in God and dedication to his commandment to love one another can we be sure that no matter what happens beyond our control, we, too, can be confident that God can bring us out of our own tumultuous time and into new life.