

Sunday, November 18, 2018
26th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 28 (Year B)
Hebrews 10.11-14, 19-25; Mark 13.1-8
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“When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. 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” (Mk 13.7-8).

Why, then, do we even bother to come to church? We don’t come here for the foretelling of wars and rumors of wars, be they real wars or trade wars. We don’t come here to hear of conflict between nations or even within nations. We don’t come here for news of earthquakes and famines, not to mention mass shootings, uncontrollable wildfires, droughts, hurricanes, refugees fleeing their homes for a better life, acts of terrorism, racial conflict, and allegations of sexual harassment and abuse, to name just some of our social ills. If we want that, we can open the Long Beach Press-Telegram or the Los Angeles Times, or we can watch CNN or MSNBC or Fox News. Don’t we come to church to hear good news? After all, the term “Gospel” does literally mean “good news.” So where’s the good news in Jesus’ Gospel predictions of the end of the world? Then again, given the state of the world, maybe having it all come to an end might be considered good news by some.

Although, that is not likely to happen any time soon. Well, I can’t really say that, now can I? After all, regarding the end of the ages, Jesus himself warned against too much speculation about the events and circumstances of the end of the world as we know it. Later in this same chapter, he tells us, “about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come” (Mk 13.32-33). So in the meantime, what do we do with these predictions of the end times? What do we do with the fact that these predictions seem to be playing out in our own day, portrayed in the media: print, broadcast, and social?

What Jesus foretells, or at least the basic genre, is nothing new. The 13th chapter of Mark’s gospel, of which we hear a small portion today, is the Christian version of classic Jewish apocalyptic literature. In fact, this chapter of Mark is referred to as the “Little Apocalypse.” As Jesus notes, everything that comprises and shapes our worldview, those things that appear to be foundational to who we are as a people, those things that appear to be stable—the temple, religious truth, the nation, the world itself—will be shaken to their foundation, torn asunder before our very eyes.

Apocalyptic literature became popular in Jewish consciousness long before Jesus. During the three centuries or so before Jesus, apocalyptic writings provided great comfort to the people, as the political realities of the time seemed to indicate to the Jews that there was no way out of the oppression they were experiencing. The common understanding of apocalyptic is destruction, but its fundamental purpose is actually revelation. For a people living in a hopeless situation and struggling to make some semblance of a future, these writings seek to answer the

question: How do those who have experienced calamity and destruction find a way to restoration?

In Mark 13, the calamity being dealt with is actually the destruction of the Temple. Jesus foretells the Temple's destruction: "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down" (Mk 13.2). But for the community to which Mark is writing in the mid to latter part of the first century, the Temple has already been destroyed. This was not just the loss of a building, the destruction of a sacred space. The destruction of the Temple, viewed as God's home, shakes the very foundation of the people's relationship with God. It calls into question who they are as a people. And for the Christians of the time, the destruction of the Temple, in light of what Jesus says in today's Gospel, seemed to signal the beginning of the end.

As the Jewish historian Josephus tells us, this was a time of "famine, social unrest, institutional deterioration, bitter internal conflicts, class warfare, banditry, insurrections, intrigues, betrayals, bloodshed, and the scattering of Judeans throughout Palestine." In response "stories spread of popular messiahs, prophets crying out woes on the city and temple, mock trials, and crowds creating tumults at the times of pilgrimage. There were wars and rumors of wars for the better part of ten years" (*Synthesis*, Proper 28, 11/18/18). So I guess things haven't changed so much in the last 2,000 years.

While these events unsettle whole societies and nations, at the same time we, individually, also experience our own personal apocalyptic events—health crises, broken relationships, loss of loved ones, financial disaster. All of which further compound the sense of uncertainty and dis-ease.

When faced with such moments of uncertainty and upheaval, our natural inclination is to seek a savior. In the face of such events and the angst that can be caused by them, Jesus warns "Beware that no one leads you astray" (Mk 8.5). He goes on to talk about all sorts of self-proclaimed prophets and even messiahs popping up. In our own day and age, we don't generally have self-proclaimed messiahs coming out of the woodwork. Although, from some of the rhetoric of our political figures on both sides of the aisle, some of them seem to think they are the answer to all our societal woes. The modern day equivalent to what Jesus warns about being led astray might actually be at our own hands. Or in our own minds. That we can easily become disillusioned with what is going on in the world and begin to shut down. We may even begin to question "how does God let this happen?" We may question "how is the church relevant in such times as these?"

It is precisely at times such as these that we need the church more than ever. For it is at such times and in the midst of such events that we are most in need of the truth that only Christ can provide. When we are most in need of the hope and the promise that are provided by the unfailing and unending love and mercy that are assured through Christ's death and resurrection. When we are in need of the new life that he has secured for us. Not just new life in some future age to come, but new life in the here and now. For as Jesus assures us later in Mark chapter 13, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Mk 13.31). While we may know this on one level, in the midst of uncertainty and upheaval, we

often need others to help point us in the right direction, to the way of truth, to Christ in our midst. This is where the church becomes necessary and particularly relevant.

This is affirmed in our Epistle reading from the Letter to the Hebrews. The author of Hebrews firmly states, “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful” (Heb 10.23). A reminder that Christ is always faithful to us, no matter what is going on in our own lives or in the world around us. A reminder that his Church, as the Body of Christ, is here to help in maintaining that hope and promise.

The author of Hebrews goes on to provide instruction on how we are to accomplish this: “And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together . . . but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb 10.24-25). That we as the church seek to uphold those who are feeling discomfort and dis-ease by, as Hebrews says, “[provoking] one another to love and good deeds.” I love that phraseology. Provoking. To deliberately and intentionally promote love, which is tangibly demonstrated through good deeds and acts of goodwill. That we do this by continuing to “meet together” in prayer and worship, whereby the promises given by our God are continually expressed and assured. And finally, that through the demonstration of God’s love expressed to each other, we might “encourage one another” to continue on in faith, trusting that what Christ promises will indeed become a reality.

This is what Jesus is hinting at when he says “this is just the beginning of the birthpangs” (Mk 13.8). When Jesus talks about birthpangs, he is talking about something new coming into being. Just as labor pains, while bringing discomfort and pain, come to an end with the birth of a new and beautiful life. Just as birth pains indicate that a child is about to be born, so do these events Jesus signal the coming of the Kingdom of God. While he is specifically talking about the birthing of the Kingdom of God, we know that this Kingdom is not a far-off event, but is something that is happening even now. That what we see going on around us are the pain and discomfort of the birthing of the Kingdom of God in our midst. And as the people of God, we are the midwives of that birth process. Birthing of hope and promise that will help carry us through times of uncertainty. Because the struggles and discomfort of the present age are not to lead to despair, but to hope. Hope in the anticipation of the coming reign of God. Trusting that God will bring an end to suffering. When the labor pains will be over, and a newborn life will emerge. Our newborn life in Christ.

In his book, *The Will and the Way*, Anglican theologian Harry Blamires writes about the intersection of divine providence and our vocation as Christians. He reminds us that “The doctrine of providence does not claim that every misfortune (even every natural disaster) is divinely purposed: only that it is divinely purposeful. There is a great difference here. We have no right to claim of any given misfortune . . . that it is directly expressive of God’s will: only that it can be made an instrument for the expression of God’s will” (*Synthesis*, Proper 28, 11/18/18, emphasis mine).

Our challenge as the people of God in this place is to not be overcome by what we see and experience in the world, but rather continually seek to be the voice of Christ, expressing the hope and promise and love that will birth a new and better life for all God’s beloved children.