26th Sunday after Pentecost

Daniel 12:1-3 Mark 13:1-8

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church Nov. 17, 2024

Whenever we turn the page in the calendar to November and our texts for Sunday morning turn to warnings about the ends times with their frightening images of toppling temples, waring nations, earthquakes, famines, fire, and "anguish such has never occurred since nations first came into existence," I wonder again at the Biblical scholars who all say such texts and such language were used for the sake of comforting, supporting and inspiring marginalized communities of faith suffering under the brutal and violent thumb of the Roman Empire…

Texts such as those we heard read this morning… like the text from the book of Daniel, written for those in the Jewish community who suffered under the merciless Roman ruler Antiochus Epiphanies between 160 and 170 BCE… Or like the text from Mark, written for those in Mark's early Christian community caught in Rome's bloody response to the Jewish revolt of 67 AD…

Both of these texts using what is called "apocalyptic" language… language pushed to the limit, describing the horrific and frightening events that will accompany the seismic shift from the reign of Caesar to the reign of God… the seismic shift from the "world's way" of coercion, injustice, power-over and fear to "God's way" of justice and compassion, shared power and peace…

The language of apocalypse suggesting that the travails people are presently enduring are signs that the seismic shift from the old kingdom

to the new kingdom has begun… but only so… and portending more upheaval and suffering to come before the kingdom of God dawns in its fulness and its glory, whenever that might be…

Hardly comforting language for people already in crisis I would think… And yet, say the Biblical commentators, it is the only kind of language suitable for people undergoing the devastation of exile, displacement, dehumanization, and death… the only kind of language that in its rawness and brutal honesty about the reality in which people find themselves can possibly offer a sense of hope…

Every November, when we encounter these texts, I have to wrestle again with the Biblical scholars' interpretation of them, asking myself how such extreme language portending such horrible events could have provided suffering people what they needed in terms of meaning, guidance, sustenance and even hope… Every November, I wonder what such texts might have to say to us in our own time of uncertainty and fear, political unrest and environmental catastrophe…

And every year, while I ponder these challenging questions, I find some helpful insights in the memory of something that happened in the Sedgwick Elementary School Gymnasium decades ago when I was blessed to be a teacher there… Something of which I have spoken before, but for the purpose of exploring a different theological conundrum, of which there seems to be so many…

So as many of you probably know, Sedgwick is the poor cousin to Brooksville and Brooklin… A town where the amount of money allocated for the education of each child is one of the lowest in Hancock County, where more poverty than you would ever imagine is hidden

from sight, and where neighbors are sometimes known to get along with neighbors like the Hatfields got along with the McCoys…

A number of things about Sedgwick are broken and disheveled and full of potholes… And during my years of teaching there I saw children who bore the weight of such things…

But in the midst of many difficulties, the Sedgwick School was, those many years ago, a bright spot for many children with many devoted and capable teachers, a great principal named Don Buckingham, and best of all, a special education teacher named Marta Harrington (who lived right here on the island by the way), and who worked with so many children with so many needs, always with Marta's special style of patience, good humor, creativity and love… She was, I would say, the heart of the Sedgwick Elementary School in many ways…

But one night, in the middle of the school year, Marta had a heart event and she died. She had been at school teaching that day, and died that night, taking her from us and the children who loved her in an instant… And while the teachers had learned of Marta's death before they arrived at school that day, the children hadn't…

And so, first thing that morning, our principal Don Buckingham called everyone in the school to the gymnasium… everyone… teachers, students, cook, secretary, janitor… And he had us make a big circle and to take the hands of the ones standing next to us…

Then he told us that Marta Harrington had died in the night, and wouldn't be coming back to her classroom. And he said we would all miss her terribly because she had helped so many children and had been a good friend to so many adults… And that it was alright to feel sad and to cry…

And then Don Buckingham told us we were going to honor Marta by doing what she did all day every day when she came into our school to work with children… We're going to put "our whole selves in," he said…

And so we did, by doing the Hokey Pokey… all of the kids and the adults in the Sedgwick School… After we had heard the news of Marta's death and reached out our hands to one another… kids and teachers, support staff, college educated and not, people from Maine and people from away, people with expendable incomes and people with no income at all, children of the Hatfields and children of the McCoys…

We put our right hands in, our left hands in, our right legs, our left legs… and we shook ourselves about until we did what we came to do… in honor of Marta and in thanksgiving for her life, **we put our whole selves in**, coming close together in the devastation of our loss and grief… Giving some of us, I dare say… Giving some of us in that circle of grieving, weeping, hand-holding, putting-our-whole-selves-in people a glimpse of something else…

Now while what happened in the Sedgwick School gymnasium that day may not seem to have much in common with the apocalyptic texts we heard this morning, the experience has helped me to better understand the intention of those texts and how they might have offered sustenance and hope to those facing the violence and oppression of Roman rule… And I say so for three reasons…

First, when Don Buckingham told the children and the staff of the Sedgwick Elementary School that Marta had died, he told it as it was, using the only language possible if it was to be true and authentic to the devastation of the moment… "Marta died," Don Buckingham said, "and she's not coming back, and tears and weeping and wailing are most certainly in order…"

He didn't say stupid things like the angels wanted Marta Harrington to join their celestial choir… or that God needed her more than we did… or that everything happens for a reason…He just announced the plain fact of death and loss, cutting through all the limp language and the common crap often offered in times of such devastating grief…

Echoing one of the most pressing intentions of apocalyptic language, as I would venture to guess that while the children may not have followed the thread of Don Buckingham's truthful unadorned announcement of Marta's death any further, most of us adults heard the cold hard truth of death as it pertained to us… It's coming. For each of us. Maybe when we least expect it. Maybe tonight. Who knows? No one knows. It just will. Period…

But, also in keeping with apocalyptic language, while reminding us of both the certainty of death and the uncertainty of the "when" of its coming, Don Buckingham also directed us to do something other than fix our attention on either the why or the when of it, saying in so many words, "Now here's what we're going to do in the **present moment**… **We're going to put our whole selves in,** in the spirit and in the name of Marta Harrington, who taught us what it means to do just that, with compassion and caring and love… We're going to put our whole selves in"…

Giving us thereby **both** the raw truth of loss and grief and death, including the inevitability of its coming for each of us, **and** a lesson about how to live fully in the meantime, putting our whole selves into the gestures, the efforts, the passions that make human life the exquisitely beautiful, tender, fragile and tenuous gift it can be, in

relationship with one another… even when everything is falling apart, and it seems the center cannot hold…

And if that was all Don Buckingham gave us that morning it would have been enough… But what I want to suggest as it relates to the apocalyptic texts we encounter in Scripture is that in the shared circle of our grief, in the shared circle of our singing and dancing and "putting our whole selves in," we were given a vision… not only a vision to live **by** and **into** and **out of** for the rest of our lives… but also a vision of something on the horizon… something dawning, something possible, lifting our heads, our eyes, our hearts, and calling us to live as if the vision was already unfolding in our midst, **even as we participated in its coming**… And suggesting that the vision of things yet to come can be a present reality as human beings are willing enough, and courageous enough, and creative enough, and vulnerable enough to make it so…

"Thy kingdom come, oh Lord, on earth, as it is in heaven…"

A vision that was made manifest in the Sedgwick Elementary School that day… a little apocalyptic experience that has, over the years, helped me to understand how the apocalyptic language in our holy Scriptures could have offered courage and sustenance and hope for people in the depths of despair…

- That is by authentically and unflinchingly naming the raw and unflagging truth of the suffering being endured…
- And by pointing to a vision of something else possible, something else dawning, something else on the horizon… A presence, a power that refuses to stay away, but rather

insists on coming into the devastations of the time to make itself known… viscerally, tangibly, incarnately… (A presence or power we sometimes call Love, or compassion, or the spirit of God, who as our Christian story says, put God's whole self in in the person of Jesus…)

- And freeing us to do the same… to put our whole selves in in the way of love and justice and mercy, in resistance to the powers of this world that divide and demean and denigrate and dehumanize… To put our whole selves in… living into and out of the vision of God's kingdom come on earth as it is heaven, and so to bring the promise of a vision still dawning into this moment… now… here… and in every now and here, even as it seems that death has had the last word…

Of course, as Jesus speaks to his disciples about the temple's destruction in our Gospel text for this morning, and describes the frightening events that will accompany the seismic shift from the reign of Caesar to the reign of God… the seismic shift from the "world's way" of coercion, injustice, power-over and fear to "God's way" of justice and compassion, shared power and peace… **As Jesus warns his disciples not to pay attention to people making predictions about when the end of the old will come, but instead, to take heart, to not be afraid, and put their whole selves into the coming of the kingdom of God…**

As Jesus speaks these things to his dsisciples, we hear the same invitation from Jesus too… in our own day and time… recognizing that it won't be easy… recognizing that we need one another… recognizing that in order to participate in the dawning of God's kingdom come we

need to hear the word of forgiveness again and again… and to receive the presence of the living Jesus carried in bread and wine again and again… to receive that gift into our very bodies… so we can bear the spirit of Jesus into the world, in a thousand thousand ways…

Remembering that the vision of God's kingdom come can be made real and tangible and incarnate even in the gymnasium of an elementary school in Downeast Maine, as the children and the staff of the school gather to mourn the loss of someone they so dearly loved…

Even there, in the unchanged fact of death, as children and adults alike make a circle, and take hands, and do the Hokey Pokey, putting their whole selves in… Even there God's kingdom comes on earth as it in heaven…

And if there, why not everywhere?

Take heart, dear brothers and sisters in Christ… Be not afraid… Even if it feels to you as if things are falling apart and the center cannot hold… For God has put God's whole self in, and even now invites us to do the same, in the name and in the way of Jesus…