

23rd Sunday after Pentecost

Mal. 4:1-2a Ps. 98 2 Thess. 3:6-13 Lk. 21:5-19

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 11-16-25

Every year, come this Sunday just before Christ the King Sunday, and two Sundays before the first Sunday of Advent (which is the beginning of a new church year), we have texts about ending times... No matter if we're in the year of Matthew, Mark or Luke, the Gospel texts on this Sunday are always texts that speak of the beginning of the end...

And not only the Gospel text appointed for the morning, but often the first and second lessons as well, leading me each year to imagine how grateful the writers of all these texts would be for a poem written by Pat Schneider entitled "Ending" ...

A poem that begins with the lines,

The beginning of the end is a beginning.

The end of anything can be an art...

And the poem ending with these lines,

Beginning is a gift that come unbidden,

But ending can be crafted like an art.

What lies beyond is mystery, and hidden.

Ending can be wholeness of the heart.

Summon heart and its companion, breath,

To make an art of what we know as death.

The thing is, the writers of Malachi, 2nd Thessalonians and Luke were all trying to show the folks in their respective communities how, as people of faith, they might approach the frightening and tumultuous times in which they were living...

Every one of these communities, whether it be Malachi's Jewish community in the 6th century BCE, Paul's fledgling Christian community in Thessalonica about 50 AD, or Luke's early Christian community in Jerusalem about 80 AD... all of them not only facing the unjust and violent political and cultural forces of their day, but also carrying with them the story so central to their faith, which foretold the tumult and devastations that would take place when the Day of the Lord (or the second coming of Christ) finally arrived, overturning the kingdom of the world and ushering in the kingdom of God... (A story both frightening and promising depending on where you imagine yourself in the narrative)...

In the midst of such terrifying prospects, it seems that the responses of many in these varied communities of faith included apathy, lethargy, indifference, resignation, or paralyzing fear... Responses the authors of these texts were hoping to change...

Which is why I say each of these authors, in their own times and contexts, would have been appreciative of Pat Schneider's poem, with its suggestion that dealing with an ending can be an art if approached

not with apathy, lethargy, indifference, resignation or fear, but with care, attention, breath and wholeness of heart...

None of these authors articulating with greater clarity what that art form might look like than Luke, who in the words of Jesus says that the end times (fraught as they always are and always will be with tumult and chaos and destruction and death as the ways of the world give way to the ways of God)... these end times are “**opportunities to testify**... opportunities to testify to the creator, liberator, lover God whose stories are rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures and whose presence is revealed most exquisitely, scandalously, prodigally and profoundly in the person of Jesus...

Luke thereby giving anyone who claims to follow Jesus the **opportunity** to approach the shaping of any testimony on behalf of Jesus like an art... Which as any artist, poet, writer, musician, maker, baker, photographer, knitter, healer, fully alive person knows, means allowing the Spirit of life, love, truth, passion, fire, wind, devastation and beauty to lead the way...

Which is what Jesus was saying to his followers in this morning’s text from Luke’s Gospel when he promised that he would provide what they needed for shaping the testimony they would be called to give on his behalf (if they were willing...) He was promising that he would be with and in them as they “summoned heart and its companion breath to make an art of what felt like death...”

Recognizing our Holy Scriptures to be a “living word” for us today, rather than merely an historical record of our ancestors in the faith “way back when,” we might wonder then, what the call to “testify” on

behalf of “God’s kingdom come and coming” might look like in the midst of our own ending times, fraught as they are with wars and insurrections, earthquakes and famines, dreadful portents, global warming, attacks on democracy, the breakdown of civil discourse, cruelty, greed, injustice and fear...

As Christians, we might wonder what our “opportunities to testify” might call us to say or do if those testimonials are to reflect the Jesus we profess to follow, *“Summoning heart and its companion, breath, in these ending times, to make an art of what we know as death” in the way and in the name of Jesus...*

What would... what could our testimonials look and sound like?

As I have pondered this question, especially over the past year or so, I have come to find guidance, wisdom, and maybe even a bit of courage in the testimonial given by Episcopal Bishop Mariann Budde in her sermon at the National Cathedral on January 25 of this year...

We’ve focused our attention on this sermon before, especially in the days and weeks just after Bishop Budde preached it... that small 65-year-old Episcopal priest in her quiet, laser-focused and inviting way addressing all the political leaders in our country gathered that day for a service of unity as the new administration took its place in Washington, DC...

We’ve focused on Bishop Budde’s sermon before... But I’ve decided that if we really want to know what a testimonial in the way and in the name of Jesus might sound like in our ending times, we

ought to listen to this sermon at least once a month... Because what Bishop Budde did was something so rarely done in this world... Something not unlike what the renowned trumpet player Wynton Marsalis did that one night at the end of a performance when, as the last note of his last piece faded into the silence of the concert hall, someone's cell phone went off...

Putting to an abrupt end that moment of exquisite beauty ... Putting to an abrupt end any feeling of gratitude for the gift of the moment... Putting to an abrupt end any hope for the flourishing of good will among the concert goers...

And in the midst of all those endings, something else, as Wynton Marsalis lifted his trumpet to his mouth and played a totally new piece of music based on the melody of the cell phone ring itself... an "exquisite piece of music." the concert goers said after the performance was over... the most beautiful piece of the entire evening...

Wynton Marsalis giving testimony thereby, (bearing witness thereby) to the possibility of a beginning in the midst of what had seemed to be only horrible, irredeemable, devastating endings... And doing so not through shame or blame or cudgel or violence or retribution, but through compassion, imagination and a determination not to let all the endings of the evening have the last word...

Wynton Marsalis we might say, *"Summoning heart and its companion breath, to make an art of what felt like death"...*

So too Bishop Mariann Budde in her sermon in the National Cathedral on January 25 of this year, in the midst of schemes and

dreams, policies and protocols that so often hold sway in the halls of power; schemes and dreams, policies and protocols that

- benefit the wealthy at the expense of the poor,
- that privilege some groups over others,
- that dehumanize people based on the color of their skin, the country of their origin, the partner of their loving, the religion of their choosing,
- that go directly to violence as a first response to any irritation...

In the midst of all the principalities and powers present that day that lead to endings for the most vulnerable among us, and death to us all whether we recognize it or not, Bishop Mariann Budde offered something else, holding up the image of what Jesus did in the violence and the end times of his own life... that is, welcoming all to the table (no exceptions), healing the sick (no exceptions), feeding the hungry (no exceptions), forgiving the sinners (no exceptions), showing compassion (no exceptions)...

She held up the image of inclusion and compassion for all to see in the National Cathedral that day, just as Wynton Marsalis held up that melody for all to hear in the concert hall that evening; thereby giving testimony (bearing witness) to something other than dead ends and death...

Bishop Budde doing so not through shame or blame or cudgel or violence or retribution, but through compassion, imagination and a determination not to let all the endings of the world have the last word...

Bishop Mariann Budde we might say, *“Summoning heart and its companion breath, to make an art of what we know as death”...*

Luke’s Jesus tells his followers that the frightening ending times in which they live offer them an **opportunity to testify**... to testify to an entirely different kingdom breaking into the kingdom of this world... A kingdom (or kin-dom) so counter to this world, it is often misunderstood, maligned and deemed dangerous... Because it is dangerous to the powers that be and to their schemes and dreams...

But as followers of Jesus, this is what we are called to do in the frightening ending times in which we live... Using the gifts we have been given, and opening our hearts to the Spirit’s leading, we are called to **give testimony** to the God made known in the person of Jesus...

- And I’m thinking here of the members of Pax Christi who, this past Thursday afternoon, stood outside the Maine State Prison holding candles and singing as a sign of their care for those incarcerated in that place...
- I’m thinking of the folks who dress in black and stand silently along Maine Street in Blue Hill from 3:00-4:00 every Thursday to draw attention to the on-going suffering in Gaza...
- I’m thinking of the Episcopalians who are being trained to accompany new neighbors in Maine to their appointments with immigration authorities in Boston so they won’t feel alone in a terrifying situation...
- I’m thinking of my friend in Bangor, in her early 80’s, who has a bad knee, and so attaches her protest signs to her cane when she attends rallies... My friend suggesting that perhaps all of us who

are over 65 might do like-wise, thereby creating a group of non-violent, colorful, creative, white-haired people called “Elders Raising Cane.”

- I’m thinking of hospice singers and the way they use their voices at the bedside of those who are dying to assure them that death does not have the last word...

All of these being examples of how we might “testify” to the love of God made known in Jesus... Examples of how we might “*summon heart and its companion breath, to make an art of what we know as death*”...

Not through shame or blame or cudgel or violence or retribution, but through compassion, imagination and a determination not to let all the endings of the world have the last word...

This is not easy work... Just ask Bishop Mariann Budde how well her sermon that morning was received by those in the halls of power... This not easy work...

Which is why I have a little something for each of you to take with you this morning as you leave worship... It’s a Mobius strip, which as you know, is an infinite loop, in which every imagined ending leads right back to a beginning...

On the Mobius strip I have written the verse from Romans 8 that says, “For I am convinced that neither life nor death, nor angels nor

rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers no height or depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus”... As you will see, when you get to the end of the verse, you come right back to the beginning...

I give this to each of you as you ponder how you might “testify” to the love of God made known in Jesus in the frightening ending moments in which we live... I give it to you so you can remember that if there’s anything the God made known Jesus is known for, it’s taking endings and making beginnings out of them...

Possibilities for life where there seems to be only death...
Possibilities for hope where there seems to be only despair...
Possibilities for love where there seems to be only hatred... All of these possibilities carried on the breath of God and in the flesh and bone bodies of those who dare to bare witness to God’s presence moving us, even when that presence is not even remotely perceptible...

We have so many opportunities to testify to this love these days, my friends... So many opportunities to use compassion and imagination and a determination not to let hatred and injustice and cruelty and death have the last word...

So may we open our hearts to the presence and the leading of God’s spirit... And may we summon heart and its companion breath, to make an art of what we know as death... “As if” (as we often say), “the world depended upon it. Because it does.” Amen.

If you would like a copy of the Pat Schneider poem referenced in Elaine's sermon, you may email her and ask for a copy.