

Homily: Proper 28
Sunday, November 18, 2018
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I was raised in an anxious family and inherited a rather anxious approach to the world. The emotional and spiritual work I continue to do as an adult has much to do with managing anxiety. I suspect that I am not alone in this kind of work.

There are many anxieties that invade our lives. Are we going to have enough financial resources to live on? Are we going to get that job we have been seeking? Are we going to be accepted by our associates and friends? Am I going to be healed from this difficult diagnosis? Is life really going to work out for me?

It is also an understatement to say that we live in an anxious world. There is much to be anxious about. The world is still stock piling nuclear arms. We seem always to be perched on an economic precipice, and a disastrous cyber-attack anticipated at any time. There are wars and disasters that, because of the modern media, seem to come right into our living rooms. Many of us try not to let these events overwhelm our lives.

It is just this experience of anxiety and uncertainty that is at the root of the passage recorded in this morning's Gospel reading from Mark. It is an apocalyptic story, a story about the end times. These stories are not often associated with "good news," although good news is often what they meant to convey. You might be surprised to learn that the entire 13th. Chapter of Mark, a scary apocalyptic chapter indeed, was written to comfort and encourage people who were experiencing violence and persecution.

The apocalyptic theme in this morning's Gospel actually begins at the beginning of Chapter 13 and continues throughout the entire chapter. The compilers of the Lectionary have given us a kind of pre-Advent theme, perhaps to begin enticing us into an Advent mood.

The 13th. chapter begins as the disciples are leaving the Temple in Jerusalem with Jesus. On their way out, the disciples share their admiration of the worldly magnificence of the Temple. Jesus responds to their admiration by announcing that the building will soon be destroyed.

Later on, in a private conversation between Peter, James and John, that continues through to the end of the chapter, Jesus shares his thoughts about living in anxious times in which things appear to be falling apart and coming to an end. The remainder of the chapter can only be described as doom and gloom. This is especially true of the portion we read this morning. **But**, earlier on in the chapter Jesus says something that is a much more hopeful, and that I think informs the entire chapter.

“Don't be anxious when you hear the noise of battles. . . . Such things must happen, but they do not mean that the end has come. These things are like the first pains of childbirth. Mk. 13:5-6. (Good News Translation)

Jesus is announcing that the doom and gloom, the on-going advance of the world's violent history, is actually in reality, a birth, with all of its associated pain, fear, and eventually joy.

To really understand why Mark is sharing this scary story with his community, and of course by implication, with us, we need to be aware that Mark is reaching back into his communities' experience of Jesus and sharing this story as a means to comfort and reassure his own fledgling community that is going through violent and anxious times.

As Mark writes his Gospel, the world to which he and his community belong is collapsing. The Temple in Jerusalem, that so impressed the disciples, has been destroyed. Early Christian leaders like Peter and Paul and others have died. The new Christian community was being forced out of the synagogue and breaking from Judaism. The Roman authorities were murdering the communities' members. The future looked particularly bleak and all seemed lost.

Into the mix of these emotions, we hear Jesus say to the disciples: *"this is but the beginning of the birth pangs."* These terrible things - they are simply the signs that something new is about to happen. These are just labor pains that precede a new birth.

In the face of terror and turmoil, this is an extraordinary metaphor. But it is a metaphor at the heart of the Christian Gospel. The suffering of Christ and his disciples was no hopeless torture at the hands of the Roman authorities, nor is suffering meaningless in our time. It is rather a suffering like that of the pain of a mother about to give birth to her new child, a suffering that will lead to new life. Mark is encouraging his community and us, to experience our trials and tribulations within the context of Christ's own suffering on the Cross and the victory of his resurrection, - *"behold I make all things new"*. (Rev. 21:5)

Only some of us here this morning have really experienced the pain of childbirth. But I suspect, in that experience, there is both hope and fear. Will this pain ever end? Will I be able to endure? Will the pain eventually lead me to the experience of a baby in my arms?

All the work of childbirth is embedded in these experiences. But it is also imbedded in the hope that new life will emerge in the midst of the pain, that this present pain and suffering is THE path to new life. In childbirth everything hangs on hope. In the birthing of a new world everything hangs on hope as well. Erick Fromm once said that *"Hope is not a prediction of the future. It is the vision of the present time in a state of pregnancy"*.

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus is sharing this new hope, the possibility of this new birth with his disciples, and Mark is hoping to pass on this message of new hope to his suffering community.

This hope is offered to us. Throughout our lives, we will have to endure many painful experiences, the overwhelming pain of the world and our own very personal and individual pain. In this pain we can so easily become overwhelmed and lose the feeling of God's presence in our lives.

There will be times when we will feel we are not in the presence of God. But the proclamation of the Gospel is that there is never a time when God is not in ours. There is nothing that we can

experience, that God has not already experienced in Christ. Our suffering and the sufferings of the world are a catastrophic experience in the life of God. This is God's Emmanuel, the way God is with us.

We are reminded in the Gospels that pain and fear are not the whole story, and that the world's pain and our own, is taken up into the very life of God through Christ. We are not to invite pain. But we are invited to enter it with the hope that we will find God as our companion there.

Our Christian hope necessarily means finding the courage to watch and wait and to endure in the face of life's difficulties. The Gospel invites us to be ready *all* the time, to live *always* anticipating the activity of God in the midst of the noise of battle and unsettling news. And to do so in the faith that God is birthing a new world. All of this will involve our response and cooperation as we meet the challenges of being hopeful Christians in the service of the world and its peoples, to be a sign of God's hope, love and faithfulness.

As David Hensen, a priest in the Episcopal Church has said. "[This] is the end of the world we look forward to - the end of this violent world, birthing a peaceful one. The end of an impoverished world, birthing a just one. The end of a hateful world, birthing a world pulsing with love.

I want to end with a short poem from Mother Julian of Norwich, a saint who lived in the fourteenth century. They are amazingly relevant to our own experience as we seek to be faithful Christians in a troubled world.

I know at times I will be troubled

I know at times I will be belabored

I know at times I will be disquieted

But I believe I will not be overcome. Julian of Norwich (1432-1419)

This is active Christian hope.