

Pentecost 24B; November 15, 2009

Lections: 1 Samuel 1:4-20; 1 Samuel 2:1-10; Hebrews 10:11-14; Mark 13:1-8

“It’s the end of the world as we know it,” sings the rock group REM. And that seems to be the church’s song today as well. We are coming to the end of the church’s liturgical year, beginning Advent in just two weeks. The unsettling gospel and the desperation of a woman in need in our first lesson are meant to shake our worlds, challenging us and our expectations.

“Life changes fast,” says Joan Didion in her widow’s memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking*. “Life changes in an ordinary instant.” She is right as she explores her times of disorientation after the sudden death of her husband John. We too have lived through changes we didn’t expect:

- The deaths of loved ones and strangers
- The fall of the Berlin wall
- Nelson Mandela emerging from prison
- The legislation to end apartheid
- An apology from the government of Canada to residential school survivors
- Civil rights legislation in the US to end segregation
- 9/11

What else was never supposed to happen?

- The war to end all wars (WWI)
- Women as persons
- Church closings
- Moving to Canada
- Children in poverty

It’s the end of the world as we know it....some times good comes from pain and reversals but not always.

The disciples Peter, Andrew, James and John are in an anxious conversation with Jesus about the end of the world as they knew it. We think that Mark’s gospel was written near or shortly after the time of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. They had admired the beauty of the building, the size of its massive stones, the security and solidity that it represented. Jesus is not joking here; he is telling the truth. He has cursed a fig tree that refused to bear fruit and he has cleaned the outer court of the temple. His clear speaking is unsettling for them. It is curious that the news of the troubling times ahead was not a conversation with a crowd but with four trusted serious disciples. Jesus is telling them how to cope in times of cataclysm; he will tell them to look beyond the external circumstances even if they have lost a foundation on which they built their lives. Where is God in the midst of all of this? What is stated in the last line of this gospel pericope? God is birthing something new.

We are given today an image of Hannah, faithful, deeply dependent on God, vulnerable in her circumstance of infertility, judgment and distress. Her husband says her security should be in his love for her, and the second helpings he provides, but in her culture her childlessness has broken her heart. The building of her life is in ruins. And so the walls

come down and she moves into the religious building, the temple court where God dwells even in the midst of this life. She begs, she pleads, she bargains. And then she sings a song. I think she sings a song despite the evidence; I think she became an example for the house of Israel because she was faithful and full of grace and hope and trust while all around her the world was upside down. I think that she moved in her soul to the place where all that is left is God.

We go to church, to the religious building too when the world as we know it is ending. We meet, someone has said, in the 'messy materiality of corporate religion, the place in community of worship and prayer, gifts and offerings, sighs, tears, cries.' We join Hannah and each other in the inconvenience of it – getting out of a warm bed on a rainy morning to be together, worshipping with, doing good with others, honoring our commitments. The letter to the Hebrews says we need this, 'to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together as is the pattern of some.' This is how we cope, not by isolating but by moving into the space of faith where we can survive. Be awake, says Jesus, but not alarmed. Be concerned but not worried. Be faithful but not naïve. Life can change in an ordinary instant.

Disciples of Christ push back, sign up, show up. We wait, we work, we breathe with God in new realities. We prepare for new beginnings, for the Advent of the kingdom, for the end of the world as we know it is just around the corner. This next week we will provide and serve dinner to the survivors of the fire at Cornerstone. They need to see us and believe that something good is coming. Do you know how the REM song ends? The chorus repeats... "and I feel fine." And I feel fine... well, not all the time, but I believe I am in the hand of God and so are all of us. And it's not really the end of the song.

Amen+

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