

The Rev. Kate Byrd
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Solidarity and Compassion in the Face of Suffering

I must say, I maybe should have been more discerning in choosing my first Sunday as your new rector here at St. Paul's given the selection of readings from our Revised Common Lectionary (the set of prescribed readings we hear in our service each Sunday). Because, between Daniel's vision of destruction and anguish followed by a great judgement, that leads to either everlasting life or everlasting contempt. Paul's letter to the Hebrew's which has been used as a backdrop for Anselm's arguments surrounding what could be seen as an unhelpful theology of Atonement. And, finally, bringing us to Mark's "Little Apocalypse," as we are warned BEWARE for the end is still to come. I am not sure where we are supposed to find our Good News? I guess all I can really say is, as Jesus warns us that "Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray." Do not fear. Because you will never hear from me in this pulpit "I am he", since of course "I am she."

But, all joking aside. Our lectionary readings for today may actually feel very appropriate, if not hitting a little too close to home, given the world we find ourselves in at this moment. Hearing Jesus' warning that, "nation will rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines", just add worldwide pandemic, global warming crisis, racial and economic inequality, political unrest, I'm sure I've left something out. And, it's not that far off from the headlines and news feeds we see today. While Mark's "Little Apocalypse" doesn't sound much like Good News, I wonder if Jesus is pointing to something not only important, but vital, for us as a community to remember at this time. As we live into the space of now and not yet. That idea of the kingdom of God already here and still to come. Or better yet as Jesus puts it in our passage from Mark, "the birth pangs."

I believe if we have learned anything over the past almost two years living in a global pandemic, it is this; suffering is an inevitable part of our human condition. None of us are immune, and it will find us in one way or another. At one time or another. Whether we work to protect ourselves from it or deny its very existence. I like you, I am sure, have dealt with the suffering that has befallen us all over the last few years. While I feel very lucky that my loved ones have been spared from the over 750,000 COVID deaths that have occurred in our nation, I have still felt some of the pains that living in a pandemic world have caused. The real anxiety and fear of myself, my family, or those closest to me contracting or spreading this disease. The depression from isolation and the loss of time celebrating and enjoying holidays and mile markers with friends and family. And, while I wish we did not have to endure all the agony, frustration, and down right yuckiness that has come with this time, it has allowed me (and I might guess others as well) to more fully understand, not only the inevitability of suffering, but also the commonality of it. This is not to deny the significant pain of suffering, and certainly not to justify it. But, to acknowledge, suffering, like death, is an inevitable part of the human journey. As Jesus reminds us today, we cannot predict when it will enter our lives, we cannot hide from it, or run away. But, we can choose how we respond.

Often when I hear the word "apocalypse" I think of decrepit zombies hobbling through deserted streets, the four horsemen descending with a vengeance on a depraved world, or some far off dystopian future featured on a big screen in the latest superhero movie. And, while these images, scenes, and depictions

make for some fabulous big screen experiences and some of the box office's highest grossing films. "Apocalypse", in its truest form, as the literary tool we find in Mark, means something quite different. Here, Jesus' apocalyptic description is meant, not as a means for horrifying, but as a way to unveil. To see the world as we have never seen it before. Through the eyes of God. That Divine view that sees it all. All the bad and the good, all the pain and the joy, all the selfishness and the compassion, all the suffering and the love. Through this lense, and this apocalyptic vision, Jesus invites us to look beyond the grandeur and facades we have built up. Like the unnamed disciple who exclaims "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Here Jesus cautions us not to become overly distracted, enamored, or caught up in the biggest, shiniest newest thing. For, as he reminds us, "all will be thrown down."

We cannot deny the unveiling that has taken place over these last two years. We cannot forget the suffering that we have endured. But, we can choose what we do with it. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest, theologian, and mystic (whom I adore), argues that, on the cross, "Jesus agreed to carry the mystery of universal suffering. He allowed it to change him ([through] "Resurrection") and, it is to be hoped, US, so that we would be freed from the endless cycle of projecting our pain elsewhere or remaining trapped inside of it." In our letter to the Hebrew's Paul writes: "by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified." And, I would argue that Jesus' offering is our invitation to stand in solidarity, compassion, and love with the inevitable condition of suffering that life brings. For Rohr "this (solidarity in suffering) is the fully resurrected life, the only way to be, happy, free, loving, and therefore "saved." And in this way our sanctification becomes our ability to "be the visible compassion of God on earth."

There is a sense that we are in a time like no other. But, to look back upon the history of humanity is to be reminded that, fortunately or unfortunately this is not true. And, in that way i am reminded of the words of the late JRR Tolken from The Fellowship of the Rings, as young Frodo implores the ever wise Gandolf: "I wish it need not have happened in my time"... "So do I" said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us." The veil has been lifted, and We have witnessed the birth pangs, some of us all too well. Today Christ encourages us, not to despair, or to fear, or even to simply wait for the end, but to hold strong and faithfully to one another, to this present moment, and to the Divine Love that loved us first. Paul reminds us " 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." In this way let us acknowledge the suffering, the great suffering that now calls us to live in greater compassion, greater sacrifice, and greater love for one another. This is where and how the kingdom of God breaks through. In all the small but significant ways we continue to share Jesus' sanctification, God's love, and the Spirit's power with one another, here at St. Paul's, in our community, and throughout the world.