

Mark 13:1-8 Pastor Bill Uetricht 11/18/18 26 Pentecost

I had the privilege of participating in a civil rights pilgrimage earlier in this week with a couple of pastor friends from Ohio. It was a marvelous experience. The emotional highlight for me came as we were standing in the kitchen of the parsonage of Dr. Martin Luther King when he was the pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. As we stood there, and I was breathing in the sacred character of being in the presence of something remarkably historic and world-transforming, we listened to his famous kitchen table sermon of Dr. King:

In that sermon, King tells of an experience that he had had at midnight in his home. You see, he had been getting phone calls, nasty phone calls, sometimes forty of them a day, threatening his life and the life of his family. He had remained strong. But this particular night, after he had been out late, he got a call from a man that really bothered. The man told King that he needed to get out of town in three days or he was going to blow his brains out and kill his family. King said that for some reason this called really bothered him, caused him to wonder if he shouldn't stop all of his work. His was feeling really discouraged, turning to all of the theology and philosophy that he had learned in academia—theology and philosophy about the why of the existence of sin and evil. But he said the answer didn't come there.

He went to the kitchen and got some coffee, and all he could think about was his one month old daughter, the joy of his life, and his very faithful wife, who lay sleeping in her bed. And he realized that both of them could be taken away from him. He said that at that moment he couldn't call on Daddy; he was 175 miles away. He couldn't call on his Mamma. He had to call on that something that his Daddy had taught him about, that something that could make a way out of no way. All of a sudden for him, religion had to become real. And so with his coffee in his hands he got down on his knees and prayed saying: "God, I am trying to do what is right. But I am weak. I am faltering."

And then he said he heard a voice, an inner voice, saying: “Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. I will be with you always. I will never forsake you or abandon you.”

“Sometimes I feel discouraged,” he said, quoting the old spiritual. “Sometimes I feel my work’s in vain, but then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again. There is a balm in Gilead,” he cried out to the approving voices of many.

I have to say that after I heard this sermon I cried profusely, and not simply because I was standing in the presence of something big, but because my soul connected to King’s soul. Now don’t get me wrong. I’ve never gone through the kind of evil treatment that he went through. The biggest challenge I may have faced was a few folks leaving the church because I didn’t believe what they believed about the Bible or because I was welcoming of gay folks or because I disappointed them in some way or another. My life has been a breeze.

But my soul connected to King’s soul because, frankly, I could resonate with his struggle. In many ways, I have been there. I’ve been there trying to discover courage, trying to figure out this faith stuff in light of horrible tragedies: five people murdered by one deranged young man, many people committing suicide, two of whom maybe were killed by others, several young and old folks losing their lives in senseless automobile accidents, scores of people being killed by planes, guns, and bombs in national tragedies on 9-11, at Sandy Hook, Las Vegas, and, most recently, Tree of Life synagogue. I’ve been there wondering if it’s not worth just throwing in the towel, if this faith is just an illusion, a prop for the weak. And I’ve also been there when something (King calls that something “the Holy Spirit”) revives my soul again, something that picked me back up, something that sent me forward, something that was, as the old spiritual says, a “balm in Gilead.” I’ve been there. You’ve been there!

“There” is where the writers of apocalyptic literature, the kind of writing that shows up in our first reading and in our gospel lesson for

today, are. The writers of apocalyptic literature are trying to find hope in the midst of horrible crises: in the case of Daniel the crisis of a nasty leader named Antiochus Epiphanes who is outlawing Jewish practice, and in the case of Mark the impending or the just having happened destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. These writers want to figure out how, in light of horrible crises, you go on, how you stand up and move forward into the future, trusting not in the terror of the people who want to control you, but in the God who is love and a new kind of power.

Sadly in our time, apocalyptic literature has been sold as predictive prophecy, anticipating what is going on in such places as the Middle East, Russia, and China. Loads of people have made tons of money off Christians who buy into their terrible misuse of the scriptures, as they turn these great writings into political prognostications. But I know you folks. You are too wise for that kind of nonsense. You are wise enough to know that this literature is fundamentally about what happened in the past, but, nonetheless, still speaks a word of power in the present, a word that wants to give hope.

In the apocalyptic Mark today, we are taken to the temple, the temple where just last week we met a lowly, vulnerable widow. This temple enralls one of Jesus' disciples. "Man, this is cool," this disciple says. And it was cool. It was five football fields long and three football fields wide. It was covered in white gold and marble. It was cooler than cool, but then kill-joy Jesus said, "This thing is going to deteriorate and fall down."

This is the existential, the real-life lived reality of apocalyptic literature. The world is falling apart. And for the apocalyptic writers, the world is falling apart in front of their very eyes. For those of us who are reading their work or experiencing their truth, the world may not be falling apart right in front of us, but the insight of these writers still speaks to us: life deteriorates. We try to hold on to life as tightly as we can. Maybe our money will protect us. Maybe our insurance policies and our stocks will. Maybe our good reputation in the community will.

Maybe our tightly wound political views will. Maybe our religion will save us.

But that's all illusion. Life deteriorates. "See those great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another." Your money won't protect you from the deterioration. Your insurance policies won't. Your political ideology won't. They will all deteriorate, sometimes even before you die. Your political world views, your religion someday, if you are honest, will prove to be inadequate for you. That, too, will deteriorate. You cannot control life's deterioration. It happens.

Now trust me. People will come along, sometimes even in the name of Jesus, who will tell you that, yes, you can control it all, that you can figure it all out, that you can discern as Jesus says today, "when this will be." But don't trust them. Don't be led astray by these folks. Run from all the people who have it all figured out, even if they are religious.

After all, deterioration is not unexpected. You will hear about wars and rumors of wars. Don't be alarmed. Don't throw in the towel. Deterioration happens. The world falls apart. This isn't the end of it all, though. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. Life is that way. This isn't the end, though. Actually, this is just the beginning of the *birth* pangs.

Wow! The beginning of birth pangs, the beginning of something new about to occur. Oh now, don't hear me wrong! This isn't a sermon that is telling you to smile because the "sun will come out tomorrow," a message that downplays the negative because, boy, something positive is going to come out of all of this nasty stuff.

No, actually, if you read the gospel of Mark, you will find that what comes out of the nasty stuff that Jesus is talking about today is something else that is also quite nasty. You know what follows all of this talk about the deterioration of the temple? The beginning of the story of the crucifixion of Jesus.

The Christian story, especially as it is told by Mark, is not about a God of power who makes sure that everything doesn't deteriorate. No, it is a story about a God who endures the deterioration himself. God enters the vulnerability we all know. God is to be found in the messiness, the struggles, the ugliness, the pain, the suffering, the deterioration. And these things are but the birth pangs for something new.

It's true. Sometimes you feel discouraged. Sometimes you feel like your work is in vain. But then Holy Spirit revives your soul again—the Holy Spirit that flows from the dying Jesus on the cross. “There *is* a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There *is* a balm in Gilead that heals the sin-sick soul.”

Get up. Get going. Don't throw in the towel. Live by courage. Stand up for righteousness. Stand up for truth. Stand up for justice. Be the people who meet God where God is—in the midst of the pain and struggles of the world.